Steunpunt beleidsrelevant onderzoek 3de generatie Studie- en Schoolloopbanen

# SECONDARY EDUCATON REGIMES AND PERCEIVED EQUITY IN SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL MOBILITY IN OECD COUNTRIES

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# Beleidssamenvatting

In deze onderzoekslijn hebben we bestudeerd hoe de vormgeving van het secundair onderwijs de uitkomsten van verschillende groepen leerlingen op verschillende tijdshorizonten beïnvloedt. Onderwijssystemen opereren binnen een voortdurend dilemma tussen differentiatie (inspelen op verschillen tussen leerlingen en op uiteenlopende maatschappelijke noden) en integratie (elke student een stevige basis meegeven om te kunnen functioneren binnen een complexe maatschappij). De verschillende antwoorden die landen op dit dilemma formuleren hebben belangrijke verschillen in de onderwijsstructuur tot gevolg, bijvoorbeeld voor wat betreft de leeftijd waarop leerlingen worden gesorteerd en de manier waarop het beroepsonderwijs is uitgebouwd.

In onze eerdere rapporten en artikels gingen we empirisch na wat de effecten waren van deze ontwerpkeuzes, zowel op korte als op langere termijn:

- In Lavrijsen & Nicaise (2015a) lieten we zien, op basis van gegevens uit PIRLS (2006) en PISA (2012), hoe een vroege sortering, zoals we die kennen in Vlaanderen, de sociale ongelijkheid in de leesvaardigheden van 15-jarigen vergroot. Corrigerend voor de verschillen die zich al in het basisonderwijs voordeden, bleek een vroege sortering in het bijzonder een negatief effect te hebben op de leesvaardigheid van kansarme jongeren, terwijl er geen effect werd gevonden voor kansrijke leerlingen.
- In Lavrijsen & Nicaise (2013b) bekeken we hoe landkenmerken de sociale ongelijkheid in het vroegtijdig schoolverlaten beïnvloedden. Een multi-level analyse op basis van gegevens uit de Labour Force Survey Ad Hoc Module (2009) liet zien dat het onderwijssysteem ertoe doet: een goed uitgebouwd beroepsonderwijs vermindert de schooluitval, terwijl een vroege sortering de samenhang met de sociale achtergrond versterkt. Toch lijkt de belangrijkste verklaring buiten de schoolmuren te liggen: de sociale ongelijkheid in de schooluitval hangt sterk samen met de armoedegraad. Onderwijsongelijkheden zijn dus niet alleen het gevolg van de manier waarop het onderwijssysteem zelf is ingericht, maar ook van de socio-economische context waarin de scholen opereren.
- In Lavrijsen & Nicaise (2014c) verlegden we de blik naar de langetermijneffecten van onderwijs, in het bijzonder naar de arbeidsmarkt. Door in PIAAC (2012) de tewerkstellingskansen en de verloning van afgestudeerden uit het algemeen en het beroepsonderwijs met elkaar te vergelijken, waarbij verschillen in selectiviteit onder controle werden gehouden, lieten we zien dat beroepsonderwijs een relatief veilige overgang naar de arbeidsmarkt garandeert. Doorheen de loopbaan verdwijnt dit positieve effect echter. Dit leeftijdspatroon zou in verband kunnen worden gebracht met de lagere nadruk op basisvaardigheden in het beroepsonderwijs: een voldoende ruime invulling van de initiële opleiding is nodig opdat werknemers zich later, als de jobvereisten veranderen, vlot zouden kunnen bijscholen.
- In Lavrijsen & Nicaise (2015b) en Lavrijsen & Nicaise (2016b) onderzochten we tenslotte hoe de structuur van het onderwijs de ontwikkeling van een positieve leerhouding, en daarvan afgeleid de latere deelname aan levenslang leren, beïnvloedt. Volgens gegevens uit PIAAC (2012) rapporteren afgestudeerden uit systemen met een sterke externe differentiatie (vroege sortering en/of

grootschalig gebruik van zittenblijven) een minder positieve houding t.o.v. leren. Wel nodigen een aantal methodologische beperkingen uit tot de nodige voorzichtigheid bij de interpretatie van deze relatie.

De vormgeving van het onderwijs lijkt dus de vaardigheden, het behaalde onderwijsniveau, de loopbaan en de participatie aan levenslang leren van verschillende groepen leerlingen verschillend te beïnvloeden. In dit rapport willen we bekijken of deze 'objectieve', statistisch vastgestelde effecten van de onderwijsstructuur ook 'subjectief' zo worden ervaren door wie het onderwijs doorlopen heeft. In het bijzonder bekijken we of respondenten uit verschillende soorten onderwijssystemen verschillende ideeën hebben ontwikkeld over de manier waarop het onderwijs in hun land functioneert.

Eerst laten we zien dat respondenten zich inderdaad sterk bewust zijn van de kwaliteit van de *aansluiting tussen onderwijs en arbeidsmarkt*. In het bijzonder in de duale (Duitsland, Oostenrijk) en in de Scandinavische systemen rapporteert het merendeel van de respondenten immers dat hun opleiding naar hun mening waardevol was voor hun arbeidsmarktloopbaan. Terwijl Vlaanderen, samen met een aantal andere landen met een schools beroepsonderwijs, hier in de middenmoot scoort, rapporteren vooral respondenten uit de Zuid-Europese landen een minder goede link tussen onderwijs en arbeidsmarkt.

Ten tweede gaan we op basis van gegevens uit de ISSP (International Social Survey Programme) na hoe respondenten de *rechtvaardigheid* van de samenleving in het algemeen en van het onderwijssysteem in het bijzonder beoordelen. In het bijzonder bekijken we daarbij in welke mate respondenten menen dat een succesvol leven in hun land vooral een zaak is van individuele verantwoordelijkheid (hard werken, ambitie tonen, het goed doen op school) dan wel van iemands sociale achtergrond ('toegeschreven' kenmerken zoals rijke of hoogopgeleide ouders hebben, kunnen terugvallen op een uitgebreid netwerk, iemands etnische afkomst). Het goede nieuws daarbij is dat, over het algemeen, Westerse respondenten veel meer dan respondenten uit andere landen vooral het belang van de eerste 'meritocratische' groep van eigenschappen benadrukken. Toch stellen we ook tussen de Westerse landen onderling nog een aantal relevante verschillen vast:

- Respondenten uit de Zuid-Europese landen verwijzen het vaakst naar het belang van toegeschreven kenmerken, zoals ouderlijke rijkdom en ouderlijk opleidingsniveau. De eigen inbreng, en met name het eigen opleidingsniveau, wordt als minder belangrijk ingeschat. Ook de toegang tot het hoger onderwijs wordt ingeschat als eerder sterk bepaald door sociale herkomst.
- In de Continentale stelsels (d.w.z. landen als Duitsland, maar ook Vlaanderen, met een vroege sortering van leerlingen en een sterk beroepsonderwijs) wordt onderwijs veel vaker als de belangrijkste determinant van een succesvol leven aangeduid. Toch wordt ook hier nog relatief vaak verwezen naar het belang van sociale herkomst. Ook de toegangskansen tot het hoger onderwijs worden als relatief sterk bepaald door sociale herkomst ingeschat, vooral door laagopgeleiden.
- De gemiddelde Angelsaksische respondent beklemtoont sterk het belang van individuele verantwoordelijkheid om het te maken in het leven. Dit geloof wordt echter niet door iedereen gedeeld: laagopgeleide respondenten wijzen toch weer sterk op het belang van ouderlijke rijkdom, vooral in de Verenigde Staten.

- In de Scandinavische landen tot slot lijken vooral hard werk en ambitie sterk naar waarde te worden geschat. Bovendien menen zowel hoog- als laagopgeleiden dat de bereikte sociale status, net als de toegang tot het hoger onderwijs, relatief weinig bepaald wordt door iemands sociale achtergrond.

# Introduction

This report finalizes the work done in Research Line 1.1 of the Policy Research Centre Educational and School Careers 2011-2015. Originally, its main aim was to integrate the insights from our six previous reports (Lavrijsen and Nicaise (2013a); Lavrijsen and Nicaise (2013b); Lavrijsen and Nicaise (2014c); Lavrijsen and Nicaise (2015b); Lavrijsen and Nicaise (2016b); Lavrijsen, Nicaise, and Poesen-Vandeputte (2014)) as well as from our work published on other occasions (Lavrijsen and Nicaise (2014a); Lavrijsen and Nicaise (2014b); Lavrijsen and Nicaise (2014d); Lavrijsen and Nicaise (2015a); Lavrijsen and Nicaise (2016a); Lavrijsen, Nicaise, and Wouters (2013)).

However, we felt that, throughout this previous work, one piece of the puzzle has remained somewhat underemphasised. Previously, we have mainly approached educational system design from a functional and a power resources perspective. In short, these perspectives argued that cross-national differences in educational system design should be seen either as an attempt to maximize its *efficiency* (functionalist perspective) or as the result of a conflict between actors with different *interests* (power resources perspective). However, a number of recent contributions in the literature have tried to complement both views with a 'cultural' perspective, in which educational system design is approached mainly as a quest for *legitimacy*. In this perspective, educational systems are then assumed to reflect a set of dominant beliefs and values about education. In this report, we will thus complement the educational system typologies developed in our previous reports by considering how citizens in different countries have developed different perceptions about their educational systems. While, mainly due to the scarcity of data on this issue, this report will remain mainly provisional, its suggestions could inform future research in this area.

# Chapter 1 Functional, power resources and cultural perspectives of educational system design

## 1.1 Educational system design: overview

### 1.1.1 Two key dimensions: specificity and stratification

In a series of previous reports, we have discussed the effect of differences in educational systems on the short and the long term. Overall, we have distinguished two key dimensions of educational systems; skill specificity, and stratification[1] (cf. Allmendinger (1989)). First, the dimension of **skill specificity** was used to indicate the dominant orientation of the educational system. Along this dimension, we have identified two poles. On one hand, 'general' systems are mainly oriented towards supplying broad general skills, seeing preparation for further education as their major objective. On the other hand, 'vocational' systems are mainly oriented towards supplying occupation-specific skills, with the major aim to prepare students (in particular those not deemed fit for further education) for direct entry in the labour market. The difference between both options can be observed by comparing the share of enrolments in vocational education (VET) in secondary school. The distinction is also reflected in the skill structure in the two groups: as vocational education usually acts as a major pathway towards medium level qualifications, the skill structure in general oriented systems is usually more polarized ('*islands of excellence in a sea of ignorance'*). The group of vocationally oriented systems can be further broken down into two subdivisions, according to the design of the vocational tracks and the involvement of the social partners in their provision. In particular, systems in which VET is mainly school-based were distinguished from systems where it is mainly provided through apprenticeships, i.e. in firms. This then led to three distinct types of skill specificity (Busemeyer & Trampusch (2012)), each with their own archetypical example: the general skills system of the USA, the dual model of Germany, and the school-based VET model apparent in other continental-European countries, including Belgium.

While the specificity dimension mainly described *how* differentiation is implemented, the **stratification** dimension covered the *extent to which* the system differentiates between pupils. The most salient characteristic in this dimension is the presence of early tracking. 'Tracking' refers here to the practice of directing pupils with different abilities via distinct educational trajectories towards different educational and occupational end-points. While all European countries implement separate tracks for pupils above a certain age, this starting age differs drastically: many countries do not track students until age 16, while others, such as Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium, have different tracks starting already at age 10 or 12. Of course, the earlier the tracking starts, the more it influences the educational career of the students

[1] A third important characteristic is the *governance* of the educational system, which is linked to concepts such as autonomy, accountability, and (quasi-)markets. However, we have paid relatively little attention to governance in this Research Line, as this was a major focus of another Research Line (1.1.2).

involved. However, Dupriez, Dumay, and Vause (2008) have emphasized that the absence of early tracking does not mean that classes are truly heterogeneous. For example, France and other Southern-European countries separate out struggling students via massive use of grade retention. In Anglo-Saxon countries, students can often take courses on different levels flexibly for each discipline (ability grouping). Only in the Nordic countries classes can be considered truly heterogeneous, with differentiated teaching and remediation classes to allow all students to master the same common core curriculum until age 16.

The concepts of specificity and stratification are correlated, but not identical. General oriented systems are usually relatively unstratified, as most students are in a general track that is not structurally differentiated (though practices like ability grouping can introduce more flexible differentiations). Within the vocational oriented group, however, all combinations of specificity and stratification are possible. For example, the Nordics have succeeded in developing vocational tracks in upper secondary (specific skill type), while sticking to comprehensive structures in lower secondary. Further note that the onset of tracking does not have to coincide with the onset of specialization: for example, in Germany tracking takes place at age 10, but the *Hauptschule*, which caters for the academically less inclined, provides only a relatively non-specialized, uniform labour market preparation (*Arbeitslehre*) until age 15/16.

### 1.1.2 Educational system typologies

The combination of these dimensions and subdimensions than gives rise to five broad 'ideal types' of educational systems (Table 1). As we have developed more into detail in Lavrijsen, Nicaise, and Poesen-Vandeputte (2014)), these typologies correspond rather well to a number of labour market, production regime and welfare state characteristics. Hence, throughout the literature, a variety of different labels has been used, depending on the research perspective of the contribution. In this report, we will use geographical label to classify the systems of different countries. Indeed, the typologies exhibit a clear geographical pattern. Moreover, by using geographical labels, we can refer both to the educational regime component of the typology (i.e. the external differentiation mechanism in place and the way vocational education is developed) and the welfare state and production regime components, instead of having to prioritize one. Table 1 gives an overview of the country classifications in its different dimensions[2], while Figure 2 focuses on four key educational characteristics.

[2] While these typologies mostly define relevant 'ideal types', some countries may be hybrid. For example, the position of France has been debated: while its educational system shares some resemblance with the stratification of the vocational oriented countries, the strong French preference for abstract knowledge has long hindered the development of vocational education. Similarly, in the UK vocational courses (for +16-year-olds) have proliferated in order to make education more responsive to labour market needs, but these courses are often provided outside the formal education system ('further education').

**Table 1** **Typology of educational regimes with geographic labelling (adapted from Lavrijsen, Nicaise, and Poesen-Vandeputte (2014))**

| Geography | Differentiation mechanism | Vocational education enrolment | | Production regime | Welfare State | Examples |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Continental Europe** | Early tracking | High | Provision: dual | Medium-skilled | Conservative | DE, AT |
| | | | Provision: school-based | | | BE, NL |
| **Mediterranean** | Grade retention | Low/Medium | | Low-Skilled | Mediterranean | IT, ES, PT, FR (?) |
| **Anglo-Saxon** | Ability grouping | Low | | Polarized | Liberal | US, CA, IE, UK (?) |
| **Nordic** | Individual integration | Medium/High | | Medium/high-skilled | Social-democratic | FI, SE, DK, NO |
| **Main source** | Dupriez, Dumay, and Vause (2008) | Hannan, Raffe, and Smyth (1996) | | Estevez-Abe (2001); Schroeder (2009) | Esping-Andersen (1990) | |

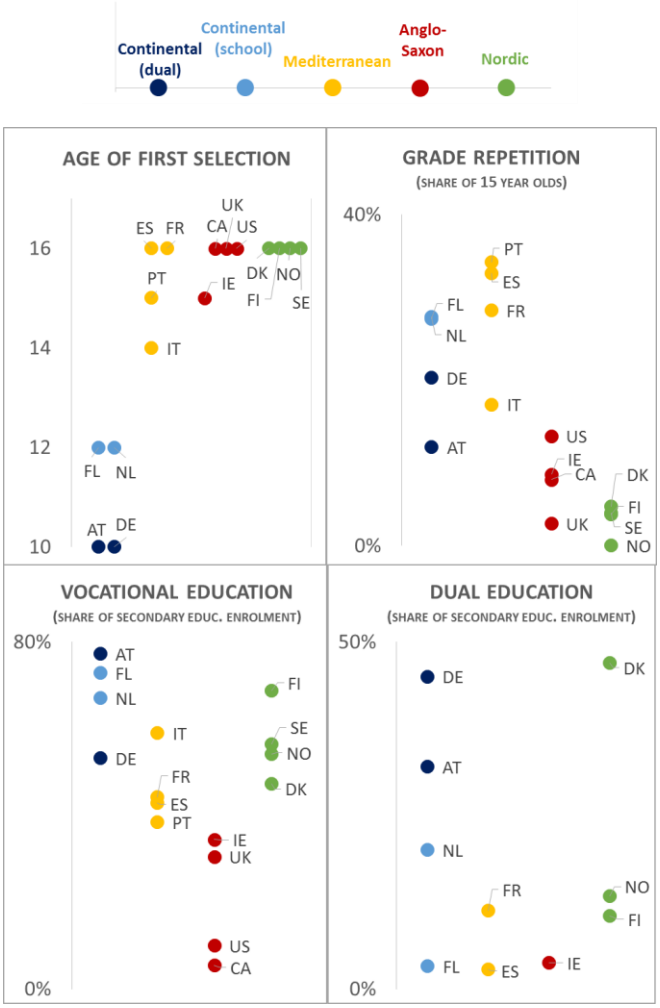



**Figure 2** **Key educational characteristics of the five different educational system types. Source: OECD**

## 1.2 Explaining cross-national differences in educational system design

### 1.2.1 Historical background

In this section, we will provide a short historical sketch of the major developments in educational system design throughout the 20th century (Standaert & Wielemans (1996); Garrouste (2010)), sketching the background against which the typology observable today can be understood.

#### 1.2.1.1 Evolutions in stratification

Regarding the stratification dimension, the 20th century has clearly told a story of **increasing integration**. At the start of the 20th century, almost all educational systems relied on a very early differentiation of students, with schools for lower class and upper class children sharply segmented from each other, even at the primary level. However, this segmentation came under increasing pressure after World War II. The most salient feature of this shift toward integration probably is the 'comprehensive turn' that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, with schools offering a common core until the end of lower secondary being implemented in many European countries: in Sweden (grundskola), Denmark (folkeskole), UK (comprehensive school), Italy (scuola media), Germany (Gesamtschule), France (college unique), the Netherlands (middenschool), and Belgium (VSO). In spite of this general tendency, however, not all systems were affected to the same degree, and not all reforms had the same success. In particular, the enthusiasm and consensus behind the comprehensive reforms varied between countries. For example, while in the Scandinavian countries the new structure was universally applied (after a series of controlled experiments, in which the effects of the reforms on skills development were evaluated (Heidenheimer (1974) – an early example of evidence-based policy making), comprehensive schooling never surpassed the experimental phase in Germany. In Belgium, the reform didn't make it into universal acceptance either. The set-back came mostly at the end of the 1970s and in the 1980s, when the comprehensive turn was stopped in a number of countries, reaffirming the tracked structure. In other countries, comprehensive structures formally survived but were hollowed out, e.g. by the re-emergence of elite schools (UK) or by the massive reliance of grade retention as a mechanism to re-impose homogeneity (France). In Belgium, the comprehensivation was somewhat diluted into the *Eenheidstructuur*.

#### 1.2.1.2 Evolutions in specificity

The cross-country differences in skill specificity are older and have remained much more stable throughout the 20th century. The most salient difference between the European-continental systems and the American school systems can already be clearly observed in the beginning of the 20th century: Goldin & Katz (2009) show how a majority of American children already enjoyed universal secondary education in relatively undifferentiated High Schools at a time where education in European countries was still sharply segmented. There certainly has been some numerical convergence and cross-country parallelism in enrolment figures into different programs: in most countries, vocational education enrolment increased during the first half of the century and declined after the Second World War (Benavot (1983)). However,

qualitative distinctions, such as the involvement of social partners or the status of vocational education, remained very sharp. For example, Müller and Wolbers (2003) demonstrate how vocational education in Germany has always been substantially different from general education because of its clearly marked occupation-specific *content*, which they contrast with the status of vocational education in France, where it has as its major aim to give pupils of lower general ability the possibility to obtain a qualification and thus distinguishes itself from general education primarily on the basis of its lower *level*. Convergence in enrolment figures thus do not have to reflect any convergence in the logic behind the system. Similarly, Green, Leney, and Wolf (1999) observe that while most countries have increased their reliance on workplace learning in vocational education, this happened mostly because of didactical reasons and did not imply any real convergence towards the dual model of firm-based vocational education.

### 1.2.2 An 'economic' explanation: the functional perspective

How can we now understand these differences in educational system design between countries and times? In our previous reports, we have mainly argued that the observed differences in educational system design between countries and times were related to the economic context (functional perspective), which we will elaborate in this paragraph, and the political context (power resource perspective), which we will discuss in the next one.

The functional explanation for cross-country variation in educational system looks at how the needs of society, and in particular the requirements from the labour market, could differ between countries. For example, Ariga, Brunello, Iwahashi, and Rocco (2005) argue that cross-country differences in educational system design are related to differences in labour market demand for either specialized or general educated employees. This of course only provokes a new question: what then explains cross-country differences in labour market demand? In a milestone contribution, Thelen (2004) traces the origins of different 'skill regimes' back to differences in industrial relations at the beginning of the 20$^{th}$ century. In most European-continental countries, she argues, skill supply was at that time still strongly controlled by the traditional artisanal sector. Employers and trade unions from the developing industrial sectors thus had to work together to break down the grip of the artisanal sector in order to create an alternative channel for skills supply, which gave birth to a strong vocational training sector. In the Anglo-Saxon countries, by contrast, the artisanal sector was less powerful, which made control of occupational skill supply a permanently conflictual issue between employers and trade unions; this gave vocational education, which required the collegiate involvement of both labour market actors, less room to develop.

Furthermore, Estevez-Abe (2001) suggests that this early divergence became reinforced by complementary differences in social protection schemes and economy coordination. She argues that individuals are more reluctant to invest in specific than in general skills, as the advantages associated with the former are tied to a limited number of jobs (only those within a single industry of firm), while the latter are transferable from one job to another. Investments in specific skills thus require some guaranteed 'return on investment'. In coordinated economies such as those from continental Europe, systems of collective wage-bargaining reduce the individual risk of wage depression: even when changes in labour market demands would return a number of jobs less needed, those who were trained specifically for these jobs would still earn a satisfactory wage. Hence, specific skill investments are less risky in coordinated

economies than in liberal economies, explaining the deep divergence in skill specificity between continental Europe and the USA. Secondly, the divergence between school-based and firm-based skill provision models within the specific skill type can be related to differences in protective regulations against dismissal: since firm-specific skills are worthless outside the firm, workers will be only willing to invest in such firm-specific skills if they are assured that they can stay in the company for a long enough period. Hence, where employment protection is strong, dual provision models (firm-specific skills) will flourish; on the other hand, where social protection focuses less on protection against dismissal and more on generous unemployment benefits, occupation-specific skills (which may be useful in different firms from the same occupational sector) will be mostly provided in a school-based setting.

Finally, the functional paradigm has also been used to explain historical fluctuations in vocational education enrolment: its increasing popularity during the first half of the century is then related to the growing medium-level technical skill requirements in a context of increasing industrialisation (Benavot (1983)), while the shift towards the tertiary sector has been named as one of the reasons behind the 'comprehensive turn' in the 1960s (Derouet, Mangez, and Benadusi (2015)).

### 1.2.3 A 'political' explanation: the power resources perspective

A second line of thought objects to the functionalist perspective that educational system design is not simply an objective response to an objective social need, but that design choices instead often were the subject of intense political power struggles. At its most extreme, conflict theory and Marxists views on education then explain stratification in terms of an elite group preserving its position by channelling lower class pupils into lower tracks, thus deliberately reproducing social inequality (cf. Bowles & Gintis (1976), Bourdieu (1974)). However, such static explanations are less helpful to explain the observed differences between countries and periods (Hickox (1982)). A more insightful application of the importance of political power to understand cross-country differences is proposed by Archer (1979), who argues that the degree of centralisation in the educational system reflects the social and political conflicts during state formation, and that this is reflected in the degree of stratification as well: weak central governments facilitate the survival of parallel structures and thus impede a strong integration of the educational system (cf. the grammar schools in England). Similarly, Wiborg (2004) explains differences in stratification between England, Germany and Scandinavia as a consequence of the influence of long-standing social cleavages on the positions of different political actors. In the beginning of the 20$^{th}$ century, she argues, in England or Germany strong social cleavages existed (between the industrial elite and the proletariat resp. between the *Junkers* and the landless farmers), and this led every stratum to create its own schools; accordingly, political representatives felt little interest to defend integrated schools and instead favoured the schools of their electoral bases. By contrast, society in the Nordic countries, where the majority consisted of small independent farmers, has always been more uniform: schools were thus less segmented from the beginning, and this 'common cause' shifted the political stances of different political parties towards more integrationist positions.

While such explanations often refer only to a selected number of countries, a more systematic account of cross-country patterns in educational system design has been inspired by the explanation behind differences in welfare state type, developed by Esping-Andersen (1990). Esping-Andersen traces variations

in welfare state design back to the structure of the power relations between the different social classes. In particular, he argues that in countries where the political left was fragmented, state intervention remained limited (Liberal world). By contrast, where the left was strong (mostly due to farmer-workers alliances), it implemented a highly redistributive welfare state (Social-Democratic World); however, where Christian-democracy, which was characterized by a class-cutting constituency, was strong, the emphasis usually shifted from redistribution to insurance. Empirically, welfare state design and educational system design are clearly correlated, with the educational systems of liberal welfare states usually relying on ability grouping, those from conservative welfare states tracking their students at an early age, and those from social democratic welfare states allowing for heterogeneous classes (Hega and Hokenmaier (2002), Allmendinger and Leibfried (2003), Peter, Edgerton, and Roberts (2010), Andres and Pechar (2013)). Busemeyer (2014) and Sass (2015) interpret this correspondence by applying the political resources perspective to educational system design preferences: they argue that left parties will be supportive of educational policies that benefit the lower tail of the educational attainment distribution (where their voters are, on average), while conservative parties will oppose any drastic expansion of educational opportunities because of budgetary reasons and fears for 'expectation inflation' among the working class. Indeed, Braga, Checchi, and Meschi (2013) produce strong historical evidence for this correlation between political power and educational positions. By matching educational reforms from the 1930-2000 period in 24 countries to the prevailing political orientation of government, they demonstrate that educational reforms which reduce the dispersion in educational attainment were indeed implemented mostly by left wing governments, while right wing governments preferred more selective policies. Similarly, a correspondence between political positions and the generosity of public education financing has been reported by Busemeyer and Iversen (2014).

However, the correspondence between political strengths and educational system characteristics should be qualified. For example, Bellaby (1977) argues that support for comprehensive education was strongest not among the lower classes, but rather among the middle classes, as for the latter social mobility seemed more a prospect within reach[3]. Accordingly, Bertocchi and Spagat (2004) understand the comprehensive turn primarily as an expression of the rise of the power of the *middle* class. Secondly, historical support for comprehensive ideals has come from all political families; Henkens (2004), for example, notes that in Flanders the reform was proposed by a conservative politician and generalized by a liberal one (see Greveling, Amsing, and Dekker (2015) for similar observations in the Netherlands).

[3] Moreover, the extremely left often viciously opposed progressive educational reforms, believing them to propagate the illusion that society could be changed through educational reform and thus to underestimate the need for social, economic and political reform.

## 1.3 Adding a cultural perspective on educational system design

### 1.3.1 The cultural turn in the social sciences

A fundamental objection to both the functional and the power resources perspective is that they seem to **underestimate the independent role of ideas and beliefs about education in developing educational systems.** The functionalist perspective assumes that institutions are designed to make them maximally effective, the power resources perspective that they reflect the strength of different political actors. However, in recent years the independent impact of ideas on policy have been stress. For example, neo-institutionalist theory (cf. Meyer and Rowan (1977), Schmidt (2008)) argue that institutional design is rather about *legitimacy* than about *efficacy*. Similarly, discursive institutionalist theory (Baldi (2012)) stress that '*ideas matter for politics (…): their impact is not ultimately dependent on other conditions, such as fixed preferences of existing interests*'. Moreover, social representation theory (Moscovici (1984)) argues that these ideas are not just individual opinions, but that they are embedded in a broader social context: shared values and beliefs are thought to offer actors a common language that makes social phenomena comprehensible and communicable.

In particular in the field of the welfare state, recent research has established '*that ideas of the good society have guided welfare state development*' (Van Oorschot, Opielka & Pfau-Effinger (2008)). Empirical research has indeed pointed at a certain **correspondence between welfare state type and the level of support for specific values** (Van Oorschot (2007)): the central value in liberal welfare states is then argued to be personal responsibility, while conservatist states emphasize group membership and hierarchical relations and social democratic states build on social equality and solidarity. For example, Likki and Staerkle (2014) show that in Europe the tolerance towards meritocratic inequality ('*Large differences in people's incomes are acceptable to properly reward differences in talents and efforts'*) is greatest in liberal countries as the UK and Ireland, while egalitarian values ('*For a society to be fair, differences in people's standard of living should be small'*) are strongest in the social-democratic Nordic countries.

### 1.3.2 Education from a cultural perspective

The argument that values and perceptions matter for educational system design is of course not novel; for example, Bereday (1966) already argued that '*no school program can be adequately explained without reference to the ultimate philosophical commitment of the society it serves*'. Similarly, the Belgian comparative pedagogue De Keyser (1986) has traced conflicts over educational system design back to a divergence between educational philosophies in the 18th century, in particular between Condorcet (universalism) and de Tracy (differentiation).

A more recent example investigating the cultural aspects of education is the work by Tyack and Tobin (1994). Tyack and Tobin claim that educational practices are '*a cultural construction*, *resulting from a conformity of organizational forms with general public beliefs*'. In particular, Tyack and Tobin consider how educational practices in the US mostly have been resistant to change. They relate this to what they call the 'grammar' of schooling: practices such as age grouping or the dominance of the individual teacher that are

so deeply grounded in social expectations about schooling that any reform trying to change it – ungraded schools, team teaching - is due to fail when it does not takes into account the importance of this underlying cultural construction of schooling. However, this work does not yet consider educational system design as a whole, but rather restricts itself to a number of educational practices. Another interesting example is the recent claim by Heller Sahlgren (2015), who argued that cross-national differences in PISA performance, such as the top performance in the developing Asian countries, are related to the stage of national economic development. In particular, Heller Sahlgren claims that educational effort is more appreciated in developing countries than in countries having reached already a high level of welfare, and that this drives educational performance upwards.

Can such a cultural perspective also explains differences in educational system design between countries and times? Indeed, the **historical evolution** towards increasing integration over the 20th century, and in particular the rise of comprehensive education during the 1960s, has been explained as part of a larger cultural movement towards democratisation ((Sass (2015), Derouet, Mangez, and Benadusi (2015)) and post-materialist values (Inglehart (2015)). Similarly, Benavot (1983) has related the global decline in vocational enrolment after the Second World War to a shifting mandate for education, with an increasing emphasis on citizenship instead of differentiation. The other way round, the decline of comprehensive schooling in the 1970s and 1980s has been argued to reflect the ideological changes that followed the economic downturn of these years, which reaffirmed the dominance of economic demands and competitiveness over democratic ideals and post-materialist needs (Wielemans (1991), Henkens (2004)).

However, these are broad ideological currents that do not yet explain **cross-national differences** in educational system design. For example, why did Germany reaffirm early stratification in the 1980s, while its Nordic neighbours did not? Isolated attempts to explain system design by ideological differences can be found in Baldi (2012), comparing German and English discourses on education, Heidenheimer (1974), doing the same for Germany and Sweden, and Benavot (1983), relating the difference in skill specificity between Germany and France to different historical experiences[4]. However, such comparisons remain fragmented and do not produce any *general* explanation of cross-national differences in educational system design.

The most promising attempt to relate culture and educational system design draws on the correspondence between welfare state design and educational system design observed above. In particular, if different welfare states have different ideological backgrounds (as claimed in welfare state research), and if welfare and education are both expressions of this ideological basis, we could also expect a correspondence between educational beliefs and values and welfare state typology. In particular, social-democratic ideology can then be argued to naturally see education as the great equalizer (Antikainen (2006)) and thus to be inclined to equalise access to quality education at all levels (Peter, Edgerton, and Roberts (2010)). By contrast, liberal ideology, which embraces inequality as long as it is the expression of differences in ability and effort, aims to remove formal barriers that would block talented students, but is happy to accept differentiation on the basis of individual merit. Finally, conservatives are argued to be more pre-occupied

[4] In particular, he points to the importance of technical training as the main driver behind Germany's economic rise during the Second Industrial Revolution at the end of the 19th century, and contrasts this to the legacy of the Enlightment in France with its emphasis on humanistic development.

with security than with mobility: their natural answer to social inequality is not to delay or decrease selection, but rather to develop high-quality alternatives (in particular, vocational education) which providing safe pathways for those not deemed fit for academic studies.

### 1.3.3 Previous cross-national studies on educational beliefs and educational system design

Unfortunately, cross-national empirical data on beliefs about education are rather sparse. Regarding stratification[5], the best examples to date have been based on the TIMSS Case Study Project, an ethnographic analysis of the public school systems of the United States, Japan, and Germany. LeTendre, Hofer, and Shimizu (2003) use these data to demonstrate that '*stratification is legitimated by widely held beliefs about how education should operate. Nation-specific values and attitudes determine which forms of curricular differentiation are legitimated and which contested. Dominant cultural beliefs about what students are capable of and the role that schools should play in educating them create different points of conflict over tracking*.'

- First, LeTendre, Hofer, and Shimizu (2003) report how **German** respondents accepted early selection and rigid tracking because '*there is a place for everyone in society and this place can be well chosen in advance. Children's abilities can and should be identified, the school curriculum should adjust for that identification, and schools have a legitimate role in assigning a 'place' for everyone in German national society*.'
- These beliefs contrasted sharply with those held by respondents from **Japan**, where tracking is postponed until the age of 15 and middle schools provide equal opportunities to everyone, although in an extremely competitive system. As LeTendre, Hofer and Shimizu report, '*there is widespread acceptance that education must be differentiated, but the point in time is considerably delayed, as compared with that in Germany. The delay seems congruent with beliefs about the role of effort as opposed to ability in determining such outcomes, as students are given longer to demonstrate their competencies before the sorting occurs*. *For most Japanese, the kind of early, formal differentiation found in German public schools would violate widely held beliefs about equality of opportunity and the role of effort in shaping ability.'*
- Finally, **Americans** argued that rigid selection '*limits students in developing to the best of their potential',* and the general concern was '*how to tailor the school system to better meet the needs of the individual. The recognition and reward of individual talent was a powerful force legitimating curricular differentiation.'* Indeed, the American system is probably the clearest example of how beliefs, in particular a belief in the transformatory power of schooling, can impact on educational system design (Kluegel & Smith (1986), Hochschild (1996)). For example, Metz (1989) shows how, at the start of the 20th century, the High School system was designed specifically to let individuals '*earn favoured slots in society through talent and hard work, rather than through the passing of privilege from parent to child*',

[5] Complementary, a number of recent research projects have investigated how ideas about the efficacy *of grade retention* may affect the extent to which it is applied, both on the micro-level (Marcoux and Crahay (2008), Draelants (2009)) and on the macro-level (Goos, Schreier, Knipprath, De Fraine, Van Damme, and Trautwein (2013)). For example, the latter concludes that '*societal beliefs regarding the benefits of grade retention play a role in (…) international differences in retention rates*'.

a practice that was instead associated with Europe (cf. the distinction between 'contest mobility' and 'sponsored mobility' by Turner (1960)). Hence, as Meyer & Rowan (2012) have put it, support for the American school system '*heavily depended to the idea that it levels socio-economic differences'.*

Similar observations on cross-national differences in educational beliefs have been reported by Stevenson and Nerison-Low (2002), who juxtapose the German view of achievement as expressing innate ability to the Japanese belief that effort is more important than ability, by Youn (2000), who discusses differences in the epistemic beliefs of Korean and American students, and by Wong, Khine, and Sing (2008), who observe that East-Asian teachers seem less convinced of the fixed nature of ability and relate this to the top performance of these countries in skills assessments tests.

Hence, educational system design more or less seems to '*reflect inbuilt social values*' (Horn (2007)) and to '*cut to the core beliefs about stratification in society'* (Veselkova and Beblavy (2014)). At the same time, however, cross-country differences in belief systems should not be overestimated; instead of opposites, they should be viewed as located on a continuum. Indeed, LeTendre, Baker, Akiba, Goesling, and Wiseman (2001) note that '*despite the cultural and historical differences between the US, Germany and Japan, teachers in these three nations often face very similar conditions or problems. The problem of providing adequate instruction to a class consisting of students with heterogeneous ability levels is not determined, or solved by, cultural beliefs. All over the world, not just in the U.S., Germany, or Japan, educators face significant problems in trying to provide equal access to the curriculum for all while simultaneously working to maximize each student's individual potential.*'

### 1.3.4 A bidirectional relationship?

The studies mentioned above merely considered *existing* differences in belief systems, but do not yet explain *why* these differences occur. In particular, are different educational regimes simply the expression of *pre-existing* differences in beliefs? Or are differences in beliefs also the *consequence* of operating under different tracking regimes?

Within welfare state research, Svallfors (2012) has suggested that such a bidirectional relation indeed might exist: *'while institutional arrangements grow out of pre-existing belief and value systems, they also give rise to new beliefs and consolidate existing ones'*[6]. While this relation remains to be examined systematically in an educational context, Mintrop (1997, 1999) suggest that institutional arrangements, such as the introduction of tracking, indeed may affect educational beliefs[7]. To quote Douglas (1986),

[6] One way in which this might work is because the actually existing reality restricts what is considered as feasible alternative. For example, in a recent German survey Woessman, Lergetporer, Kugler, and Werner (2014) show that support for early tracking is conditioned by the perception that such an arrangement is inevitable: support for early tracking dropped after respondents were confronted with international evidence on alternatives for such a design.

[7] In particular, Mintrop makes use of the quasi-experiment following the unification of Germany, when the Eastern Länder imported the educational system design from the Western Länder. The unpreparedness and the speed of the reform - the old school structures were simply dissolved by the end of the school year and ordered to reopen as tracked schools after the summer holiday – made track assignment close to random: there were simply no formal admission criteria. Hence, Mintrop argues that in the first years, tracks could be regarded as mere constructs that had little to do with real differences in ability; indeed, Mintrop observes that learning standards across tracks differed very little. Still, Mintrop observes that teachers, in particular from the upper track, expressed a solid belief in the appropriateness of track labels immediately after their

'people make new kind of institutions, these institutions make new labels, and these labels make new kinds of people'.

Finally, an important recent contribution by Mijs (2016) suggests that stratification matters for how pupils attribute failure and success at school. He distinguishes between two categories of factors: external factors, such as luck of the quality of the teacher, and internal factors, in particular (a lack of) ability. Using PISA 2012 data, Mijs (2016) then shows that '*students in mixed-ability groups tend to attribute their mathematics performance primarily to external factors, whereas vocational- and academic-track students are more likely to blame themselves for not doing well'.* Moreover, '*these differences between mixed-ability group students and tracked students are more pronounced in school systems where tracking is more extensive.'* Hence, he argues, stratification replicates itself because it legitimizes existing inequalities: *'Students who fare well come to think of their accomplishments as the sole result of their effort and ability, whereas students who fail to do well academically have only themselves to blame.*'

introduction. Given the absence of any 'functional' justification for these labels, he argues that this belief was rather an *'accommodation to the organizational reality (…) and the institutional charter of the new tracking structure. An explanation for the swift adoption of new tracking beliefs cannot be found in a technical nexus to student ability and teaching effectiveness; rather these beliefs are formed in an institutional nexus to the new society.'*

# Chapter 2 Cross-national differences in perceptions about education

In this Chapter, we will empirically consider the relationship between the educational regimes developed previously (see §1.1) and perceptions about the educational system reported in a number of surveys. In particular, we will consider perceptions about the two themes that have been central in this research line: first, the role of education in society, in particular in relationship with the labour market, and secondly, the fairness of the school system and its broader socio-economic context.

## 2.1 The role of education in society and in the labour market

### 2.1.1 Educational system design and labour market preparation

A first important topic is the link between education and the labour market, or, more broadly, the goal of education in society. In this section, we will use two waves of the Eurobarometer to approach this issue. The Eurobarometer, which has been monitoring public opinion in the European Member States from 1973 onwards, occasionally surveys opinions about education have been surveyed. For example, in Lavrijsen, Nicaise, and Poesen-Vandeputte (2014), we used data from Eurobarometer 75.4 (June 2011) to show how the attractiveness of vocational education corresponded to the design of the educational system, recording a higher appreciation of vocational education in the dual countries (mainly due to high labour market relevance) and in some Nordic countries (mainly due to the integration between general and vocational programs) (cf. Lasonen & Young (1998); Lasonen and Manning (2000)). A similar analysis, using the same dataset, has recently been put forward by CEDEFOP (2014), who concluded that "*the attractiveness of VET is influenced by various endogenous and exogenous factors. The wider context in which VET operates, such as the dominant form of industry or the structure of the labour market, as well as prevailing social and cultural norms, are very powerful determinants (…). Perceptions about the value of VET and the likelihood of finding employment after completing VET are also decisive elements*".

In our previous reports, we have already discussed the relationship between education and the labour market into some detail (cf. Lavrijsen and Nicaise (2014c), Lavrijsen, Nicaise, and Poesen-Vandeputte (2014)):

- The Continental Dual systems demonstrated the strongest institutional link with the labour market: social partners are heavily involved in the educational system and employers train a large part of the

workforce through offering apprenticeships[8] (Busemeyer & Trampusch (2012); Thelen and Busemeyer (2012)).

- The other two 'vocational oriented' system types – i.e. the Continental School-based and the Nordic type, also have a highly developed vocational system, aimed at preparing youngsters for the labour force (Iannelli and Raffe (2007)). However, as vocational training is dominantly school-based, the link between education and labour is somewhat less strong.
- In the Anglo-Saxon world, education is mostly general oriented, leading to a weaker tie between (the content of) educational programs and labour market positions. However, labour market are in these countries usually regulated more loosely than in the Continental countries, and this boosts the premium (in particular in terms of earnings) on having a good education[9]. Moreover, large differences in the quality of educational institutions (in particular at the tertiary level) might further amplify the importance of education for future outcomes, even in the absence of strong *institutional* links.
- Finally, the Mediterranean countries usually report a low congruence between educational attainment and labour market positions. Many leave school without a secondary qualification (Lavrijsen and Nicaise (2013b)), as differences in employment probability between high- and low-educated citizens are usually lower than in the other systems.

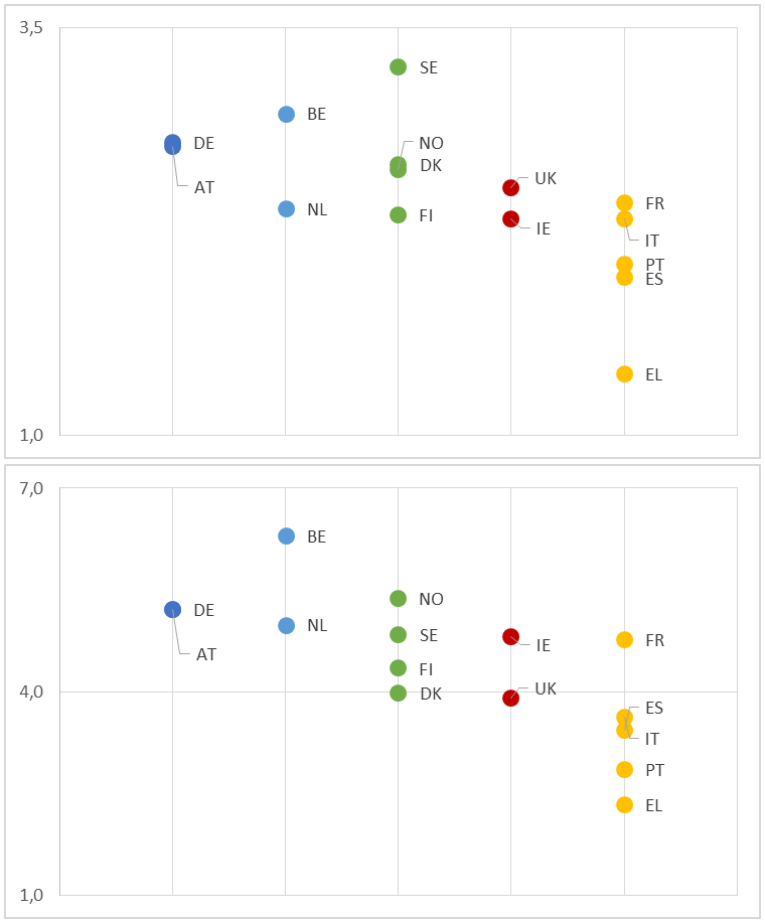
To illustrate these cross-national differences in the strength of the relationship between education and the labour market empirically, Figure 3 shows the probability of not having a job for low-educated (ISCED 0-2), medium-educated (ISCED 3-4) and high-educated (ISCED 5-6) individuals at working age (25-65 year olds), based on recent Eurostat-data (2015). The right panel translates these probabilities into odds ratios, which compare the odds of not having a job between different categories: the more the odds ratio exceeds 1, the better a certain qualification protects against unemployment or inactivity (compared to having no secondary qualification; this approach is similar to the construction of the 'importance of qualifications' in Lavrijsen and Nicaise (2013b)). The figure shows that the protective effect of secondary and tertiary qualifications is indeed smallest in the Mediterranean countries and larger in the Continental-Dual, Continental-school based and Nordic countries.

[8] However, Thelen and Busemeyer (2012) argue that the apprenticeship model of the dual countries recently has lost some of its appeal. They attribute this to the erosion of collective bargaining, which has reduced the individual incentive to contribute to collective training, reflected in an increasing lack of adequate training spots.

[9] For example, Hanushek, Schwerdt, Wiederhold, and Woessmann (2013) found that the return to cognitive skills, as measured in PIAAC, was highest in the USA and in Ireland.

**Figure 3: Share of respondents not having a job (left) and odds ratios of not having a job (a) between medium and low educated respondents (upper right) and (b) between high and low educated respondents (lower right)**

| Country | ISCED 0-2 | ISCED 3-4 | ISCED 5-6 |
|---|---|---|---|
| DE | 41,3 | 20,1 | 11,9 |
| AT | 47,1 | 24,3 | 14,6 |
| BE | 53,4 | 27,8 | 15,4 |
| NL | 40,0 | 21,8 | 11,8 |
| DK | 39,5 | 19,7 | 14,1 |
| FI | 46,9 | 27,3 | 16,9 |
| SE | 36,7 | 15,1 | 10,7 |
| NO | 39,4 | 19,8 | 10,8 |
| IE | 51,2 | 31,1 | 17,9 |
| UK | 39,8 | 20,8 | 14,5 |
| EL | 51,5 | 43,6 | 31,3 |
| ES | 48,4 | 32,3 | 21,5 |
| FR | 47,8 | 27,4 | 16,1 |
| IT | 49,8 | 29,9 | 21,5 |
| PT | 35,7 | 21,3 | 16,3 |



### 2.1.2 Perceived link between education and the labour market

Above, we saw that countries differ in the size of the protective effect of education on the labour market. The recent Eurobarometer 81.3 (April-May 2014) allows to assess whether citizens in European Member States indeed express different appreciations of the link between both. In this survey, respondents were asked

> *'To what extent do you agree or disagree that your education or training has provided (or is providing) you with the necessary skills to find a job in line with your qualifications?'*

Table 2 reports the participating countries with their sample sizes[10].

**Table 2 Sample sizes (Eurobarometer 81.3)**

| Country | Sample size | Country | Sample size | Country | Sample size |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| AT | 1,000 | FI | 1,016 | LU | 504 |
| FL | 538 | FR | 1,027 | NL | 1,032 |
| WL | 442 | GB | 1,306 | PT | 1,008 |
| DE | 1,546 | GR | 1,008 | SE | 1,025 |
| DK | 1,007 | IE | 1,005 | | |
| ES | 1,039 | IT | 1,007 | *Total* | *15,510* |

Figure 4 reports the share of the respondents that indicated to 'totally agree' or to 'tend to agree' with this statement. The overall pattern confirms that respondents from vocational oriented system perceive education to provide a better preparation for the labour market than respondents from Mediterranean countries. However, note that the vocational-school based countries score somewhat lower than the dual

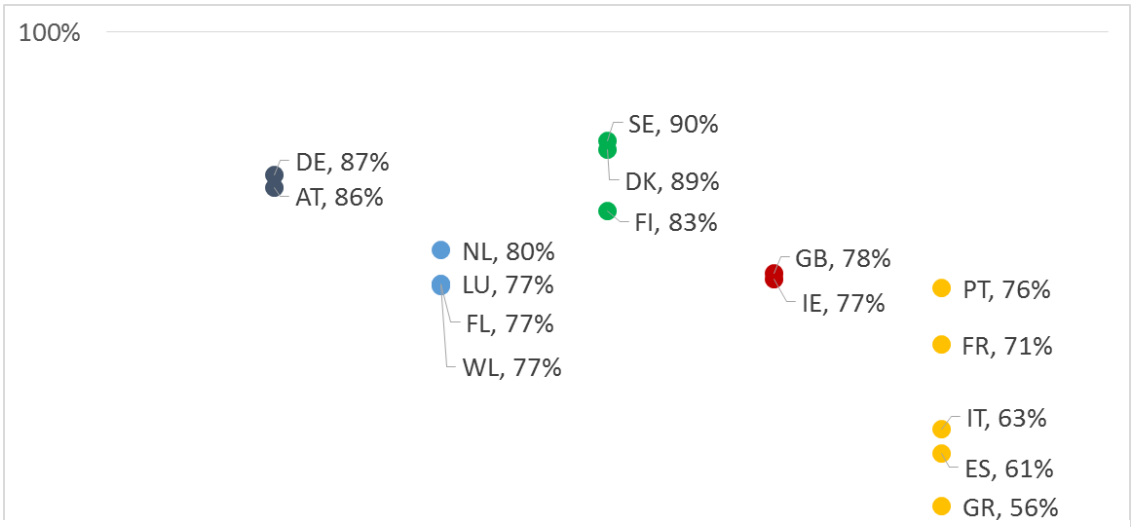



**Figure 4 Share of respondents that agree with the statement that education provided them with the necessary skills to find a job**

[10] The Flemish (FL) and Walloon Region (WL) are treated as separate entities; the sample size for the Brussels Capital Region was too small.

and Nordic countries, instead reporting only a similar satisfaction about the connection with the labour market as the Anglo-Saxon countries. In Flanders, about 1 out of 4 respondents reported that education did not well prepare them for labour market entry.

The survey allows to distinguish between respondents at different levels of educational attainment. Figure 5 shows the perceived connection between education and labour for respondents with secondary (left) and tertiary qualifications (right). In line with the observations in the previous paragraph, the dual and Nordic countries in particular distinguish themselves at the secondary level, while at the tertiary level the Anglo-Saxon and even, to a smaller extent, the Mediterranean countries report relatively high rates of satisfaction about the link between education and labour.

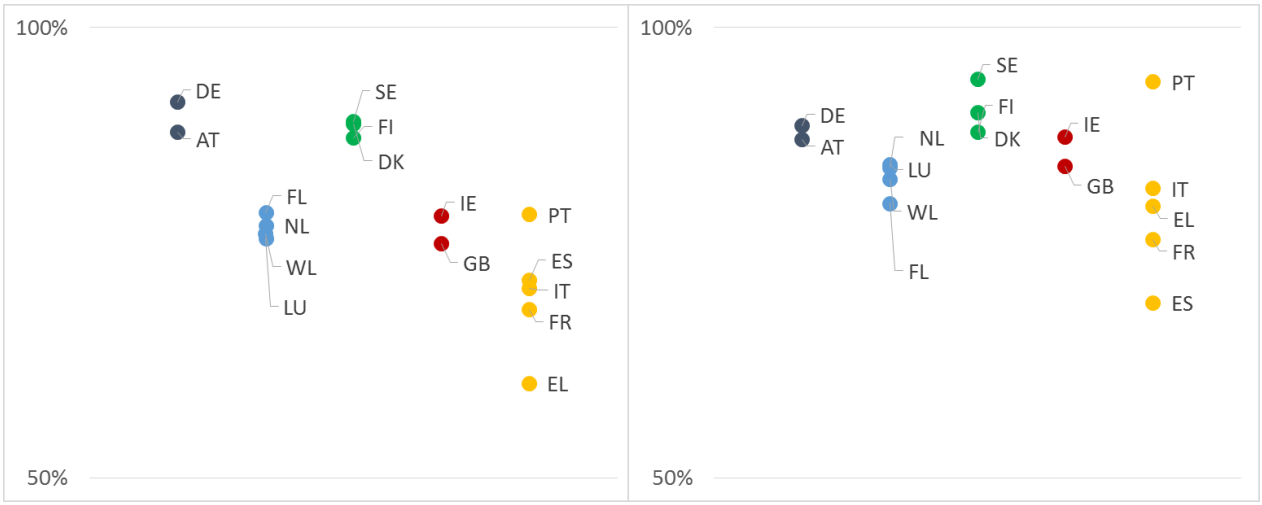



**Figure 5** **Share of respondents that agree with the statement that education provided them with the necessary skills to find a job, separately for respondents with secondary (left) and tertiary qualifications (right)**

### 2.1.3 Opinions about the main role of schools

Above, we saw that citizens from different European Member States report different judgements about the connection between education and the labour market. However, labour market preparation is not the only objective of education. In the literature, three independent objectives are usually distinguished (cf. Van de Werfhorst (2014); Van de Werfhorst, Elffers, and Karsten (2015); Van de Werfhorst and Mijs (2007)): preparing youngsters for the labour market, provide them with the knowledge and skills to develop their personalities, and socialize them into active participants in democratic society[11].

In the educational system, a balance between these three objectives has to be found. In this section, we will use data from an older (but, given that educational system orientations probably change slowly, still relevant) Eurobarometer 44.0 (1995), which surveyed the opinions of adults on the main tasks of the educational system. In particular, this survey asked the following question:

*'If you had to choose, would you say that the main role of school for children is to:*

1. *Develop their personality and contribute to broadening their abilities*
2. *Prepare them for a career*
3. *Teach them to live in society and adapt to changes in society'*

The three options thus more or less correspond to the three objectives outlined above. Note that respondents could only indicate one goal to be the most important role of schools. Hence, when a certain goal would be rarely cited, this does not necessarily imply that this objective is neglected in the educational system - only that other goals are perceived to be more important. The figures thus have to be interpreted in a relative sense, not in an absolute one. Secondly, note that the survey question refers to a normative appreciation by the respondents – what they believe school *should* be about, not to the actual weight given to different goals in their respective countries. Finally, the question does not specify a specific part of the educational system, but rather refers to 'school' in its totality. By contrast, the educational regime typology defined earlier mainly relied on design characteristics from secondary education.

[11] While we have in this research line attributed a lot of effort to the first (skills) and second (labour market) objective, the promotion of civic attitudes has been mostly neglected in our research. At a time where conflicts about citizenship and socialization seem to become all the more pressing, the relationship between educational system design and civic outcomes might deserve additional attention in the future. Interestingly, Crul, Schneider & Lelie (2013), using a quasi-experimental design in which they compare the civic attitudes among children from immigrants originating from the same region living in different European arrival countries, have shown that educational system design indeed may affect acceptance of western values among second-generation immigrants. In particular, there are some indications that countries with a heavily differentiated systems perform less well in promoting active citizenship among their students, in particular among disadvantaged students (Netjes, Werfhorst, Karsten, and Bol (2011); Kavadias (2014); Van de Werfhorst (2015a)). Van de Werfhorst (2014) thus argues that '*the educational structure of a stratified educational system, with its early selection and strong vocational orientation, is ill-suited to provide the same kind of citizenship education to all of its younger citizens. Youngsters come to develop their identity and personality during early adolescence, and it is precisely at this stage that students are separated into different classes and school buildings, largely on the basis of cognitive achievements*'.

Table 3 reports the participating countries with their sample sizes. Unfortunately, the data do not allow to distinguish between the Belgian regions[12].

**Table 3 Sample sizes (Eurobarometer 44.0)**

| Country | Sample size | Country | Sample size | Country | Sample size |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| AT | 993 | FI | 1,032 | IT | 1,009 |
| BE | 968 | FR | 1,007 | LU | 931 |
| DE-E | 1,076 | GB | 1,054 | NL | 1,013 |
| DE-W | 1,087 | GB-NIR | 304 | PT | 966 |
| DK | 995 | GR | 1,006 | SE | 1,005 |
| ES | 980 | IE | 1,005 | Total | 16,431 |

Table 4 reports, for each country, the share of the respondents that reported the most important role of school to be personal development, labour market preparation, respectively integration in society. Overall, personal development is, on average, the objective that is most cited as the most important objective, followed by the labour market and integration in society.

**Table 4 Share of respondents reporting that the most important role of school is personal development, labour market preparation, resp. integration in society**

| Regime type | Country | Personal Development (%) | Labour Market (%) | Integration in society (%) | Regime type | Country | Personal Development (%) | Labour Market (%) | Integration in society (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Continental Dual** | AT | 43.8 | 38.2 | 18 | **Anglo-Saxon** | GB | 41.7 | 29.1 | 29.2 |
| | DE-E | 67 | 13 | 20 | | GB-NIR | 43.5 | 39.1 | 17.4 |
| | DE-W | 54.5 | 24.1 | 21.4 | | IE | 40.2 | 34.3 | 25.5 |
| **Continental school-based** | BE | 35.2 | 30.2 | 34.6 | **Nordic** | DK | 65.2 | 4.5 | 30.3 |
| | LU | 23.8 | 48.8 | 27.4 | | FI | 48.4 | 7.7 | 43.9 |
| | NL | 39.2 | 10.7 | 50.1 | | SE | 64.5 | 16.4 | 19.1 |
| **Mediterranean** | ES | 44.5 | 15.6 | 39.9 | | | | | |
| | FR | 37.2 | 27.2 | 35.6 | | | | | |
| | GR | 57.6 | 17.2 | 25.2 | | | | | |
| | IT | 44.9 | 12.4 | 42.7 | | | | | |
| | PT | 38.7 | 34.3 | 27 | **Average** | | **46** | **24** | **30** |
| | ES | 44.5 | 15.6 | 39.9 | **St. dev.** | | 12 | 13 | 10 |

[12] The survey classified German Länder in two separate entities (DE-E and DE-W), referring to the division between Eastern and Western Germany until 1989. Moreover, Northern Ireland (GB-NIR) was considered an entity separate from the rest of the United Kingdom (GB). We have retained these classifications here.

To present these cross-country-differences in a more clarifying way, we developed standardized triangle scores for each country. First, we standardized the percentages from Table 4. We then plotted these standardized scores on a raster with axes ranging from -2 (the centre point of the graph) to +2 (indicated by an outside triangle). We also added an inner triangle indicating zero, i.e. the international average. These triangles thus can be interpreted as follows: when for a certain country and a certain objective the vertex is outside the inner triangle, the share of the respondents citing this objective was in this country larger than average. The more the vertex then approaches the outside triangle, which indicates the point where the percentage would be two standard deviations above average, the larger the share of the respondents citing this dimension. The other way round, when a vertex is inside the inner triangle, the share of the respondents citing this objective was smaller than average; the more a vertex approaches the centre point of the graph, which indicates the point where the percentage would be two standard deviations below average, the smaller the share.

Figure 6 illustrates this idea for a hypothetical country. The figure shows that in particular the labour market is given more weight in this country than the international average, while social integration attracts less attention and personal development is judged as important as in an average country. In fact, this figure was based on a hypothetical situation in which the share of respondents citing each objective was 45% (personal development), 35% (labour market) resp. 20% (society); using the international averages and standard deviations from Table 4, one can see that these percentages translated in standardized scores of about 0, +1 resp. -1, as indicated in the figure.

Hence, it is important that the triangle indicates a *relative* position (whether the objective is cited more frequently in a country than in the other countries) and not an absolute distribution. In the hypothetical example, indeed more respondents referred to personal development than to the labour market, but the vertex of the latter was further away from the centre, due to the lower international average.

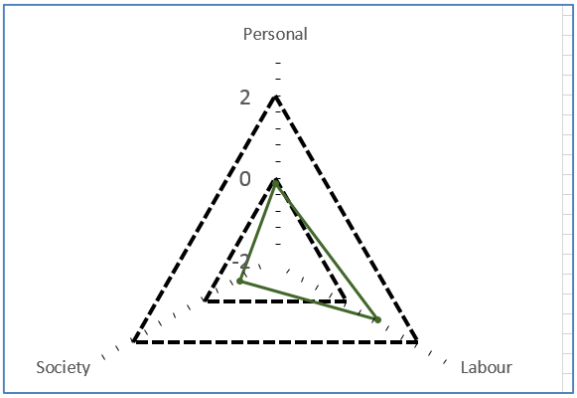


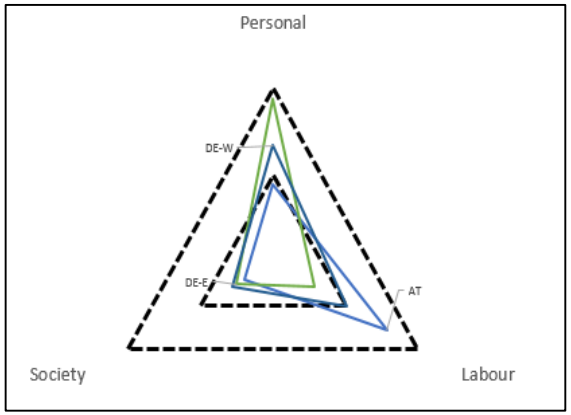

**Figure 6** **Example of a triangle representation of standardized shares**

Figure 7 contains the standardized triangle representations for all countries, grouped by educational regime. Overall, there seems to be only a limited correspondence between educational regimes and preferred objectives of education, in particular in the Continental groups. In the Dual group, Austria scores high on the labour market preparation dimension, but the German entities instead seem to prioritize personal development. Hence, while labour market preparation is the major aim of the extensive apprenticeship system – successfully, as we saw - other components of the educational system seem to be more geared towards personality building. We can only ponder on the reasons behind this preference, such as Germany's large educational tradition of self-cultivation (*Bildung)*, with a strong focus on personal development (cf. Bruford (1975)). In the Continental school-based countries as well, the image is rather diffuse. Note that in Belgium, the three educational objectives are each prioritized by an almost equal share of the respondents.

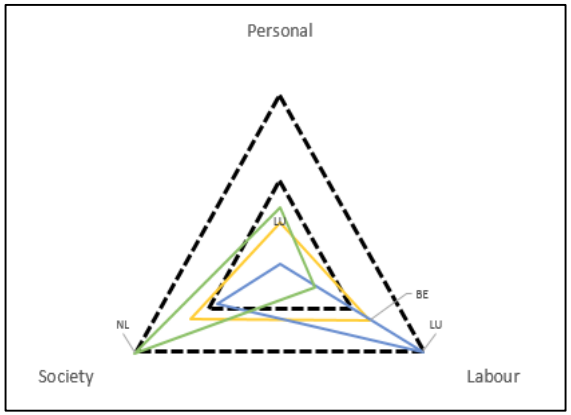
The Nordic countries somewhat cluster around a strong emphasis on personal development (or, in the case of Finland, social integration). Comprehensive reforms in these countries have always supported a strong focus on the development of abilities in a broad sense (Bellaby (1977); Harnqvist (1989)), while there deeper historical roots could also be cited (Korsgaard and Wiborg (2006)). By contrast, the Anglo-Saxon countries constitute perhaps the clearest cluster by their overt preference for labour market relevance. Again, while there is no evident reason to explain this preference, it could be noted that the tide of neoliberalism, that has always insisted on the primacy of the labour market over other social spheres, has been particularly strong in the Anglo-Saxon countries (Olssen and Peters (2005); Payne (2000)). Finally, the Mediterranean countries, and in particular France, Spain and Italy, highlight the social integrative aspect of education, an aspect that has been related before to the strong emphasis on the community (as an alternative for the welfare state, Arts and Gelissen (2002)) and on the recent quest for consolidation (Gal (2010)) of the state.

Hence, overall, the preference for the different objectives of education seem to be only to a limited extent related to the educational system typologies, while more idiosyncratic factors are likely to explain the observed patterns.

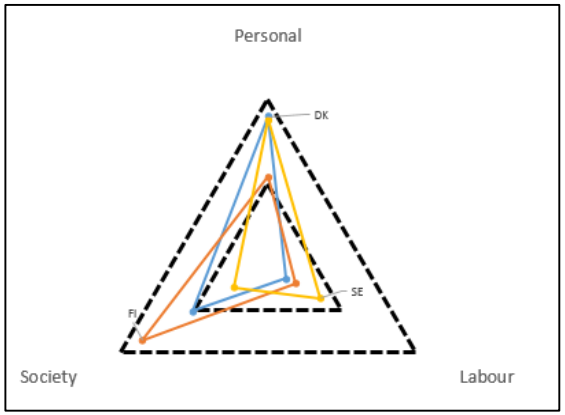
**Continental Dual**



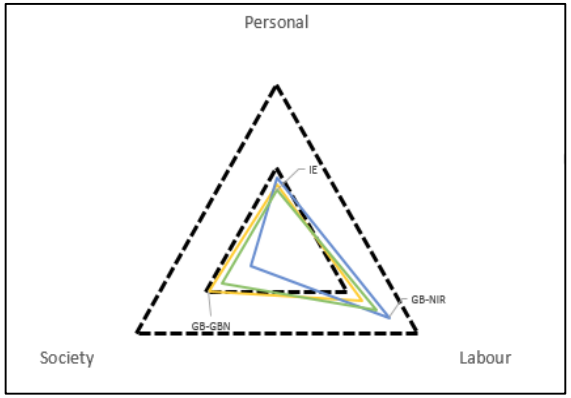

**Continental school-based**




**Nordics**




**Anglo-Saxon Group – Labour Market**




**Mediterranean Group**

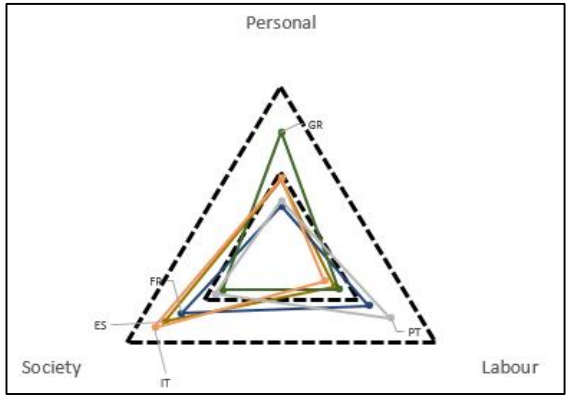



**Figure 7** **Cross-country differences in the importance attached to personal development, labour market preparation, and social integration**

Finally, the background information allows to consider how individual background affects the priority attributed to different objectives[13]. Table 5 shows that respondents with a higher educational attainment value personality development higher than those with a lower educational attainment. The reverse is true for the labour market objective, which is primarily important for those with a lower educational attainment. For social integration, no clear relationship with educational background is observed in the international dataset. Among Belgian respondents, the patterns regarding education are even clearer, with a very strong effect of educational background on the primacy of the labour market objective.

**Table 5 Differences in the importance attached to personal development, labour market preparation, and social integration, according to social background**

| | Personality | Labour Market | Society |
|---|---|---|---|
| **All countries** | | | |
| Low educated | 38.6 | 27.2 | 34.2 |
| Middle educated | 48.1 | 22.1 | 29.8 |
| High educated | 54.6 | 12.9 | 32.5 |
| | | | |
| **Belgium** | | | |
| Low educated | 28.2 | 51.1 | 20.7 |
| Middle educated | 34.4 | 27.7 | 37.9 |
| High educated | 42.5 | 18.2 | 39.2 |

[13] Age and sex did not significantly affect the valuation of the different objectives.

## 2.2 The appreciation of the fairness of the social and school system

### 2.2.1 Educational system design and social fairness

In this section, we will consider perceptions about the fairness of society as a whole, and of the school system in particular. With 'fair', we mean here that the importance of ascribed assets, i.e. assets for which somebody cannot be held responsible, should be minimized. For example, the mere fact of having wealthy parents should affect life outcomes as little as possible. Importantly, this does not mean that social inequality in itself would be unfair. By contrast, as scholars as Parsons (1951) already defended, some degree of social inequality seems necessary, as society requires different profiles to occupy different positions, and the more important positions have to be the best rewarded. Hence, our focus is rather on the criteria according to which these different social positions are distributed: do they depend on the quality of the *ascribed assets* (e.g. wealth of the parents), or are they a function of *individual abilities* (such as talent, effort, and ambition).

Schematically (Figure 8), social positions ('destinations') are assumed to depend both on social origin and abilities[14]. Both can have a direct effect on social status: for example, access to privileged networks may help children from advantaged families to reach higher social positions (direct effect of origin on destination), while hard work may help to reach a high social status as well (direct effect of abilities on destination). However, in particular in modern society, the strongest effects probably are indirect, i.e. through educational attainment. Indeed, modernisation theory (cf. Bell (1976)) argues that the information society puts such a high premium on knowledge and skills, that educational attainment becomes the ultimate foundation of social success. As strengthening the link between education and destination would imply loosening the (direct) association between social origin and destination, society would become fairer: hence, education is seen as the ultimate foundation of social mobility in modern society.

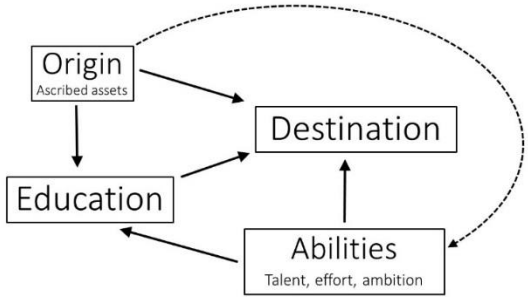



**Figure 8 Origin-Education-Destination triangle**

[14] As we have discussed on previous occasions, social origin and ability are also interrelated. See Lavrijsen and Nicaise (2015a) for a more in depth discussion.

The vanishing of mere ascription as the dominant mechanism for determining life chances, in favour of education, indeed seems to have made current Western society more meritocratic than ever before (Marks (2005); Breen, Luijkx, Müller, and Pollak (2009); De Beer (2016)). However, there are some concerns that society still is not fully meritocratic. First, cultural and economic disadvantage still seems to affect educational attainment, net of ability (Breen and Goldthorpe (2001); Marshall and Swift (1996); Dronkers (1998)). Shavit & Blossfeld (1993) thus find that in many countries the link between social origin and educational outcomes has remained remarkably stable throughout the 20th century. Secondly, as Jencks (1972) was the first to argue, occupational destinations might still depend on social origin, net of educational achievement, e.g. through access to networks.

In sum, there are two ways in which the 'meritocratic ideal' (only ability and effort should predict social status) could be distorted: either by social origin affecting educational achievement (net of ability), or by social origin affecting destinations directly (independent of educational attainment). In the next sections, we will thus discuss, for each of the educational regimes discussed above[15], how their design could affect these biases.

## Continental countries

As we have discussed on previous occasions, a reliance on early tracking has been shown to strengthen the link between social background and educational performance (Lavrijsen and Nicaise (2013a); Lavrijsen and Nicaise (2013b); Lavrijsen, Nicaise, and Wouters (2013)). This is due to two reasons. First, socially disadvantaged students seem to be disproportionally selected into less prestigious tracks, even after accounting for prior performance[16]. This claim has been empirically substantiated in studies from several countries (see Boone and Van Houtte (2012) for Flanders, Ditton and Krusken (2006) for Germany, and Duru-Bellat (2002) for France). Secondly, less prestigious tracks usually offer less stimulating learning environments which may hamper their performance (Hanushek and Woessmann (2006)). The argument here is that shifting students to a less demanding track, where the curriculum is less challenging and the learning conditions far from optimal, rather leads to ignoring learning difficulties instead of adequately addressing them (Hattie (2002); Hattie (2008))[17]. Hence, in Lavrijsen and Nicaise (2015a)) we have used data from PIRLS 2006 and PISA 2012 to show that early tracking increased the effect of social origin on reading achievement, net of differences existing before the onset of tracking. In particular, early tracking

[15] In this section, we will not differentiate between the two Continental categories, as the organization of vocational education in a dual resp. school-based way is less relevant on this point.

[16] An explanation for this effect is that the educational ambitions of young pupils are strongly influenced by the role models they perceive in their environment: the aspirations of students with parents from less prestigious professions are usually more modest than those of children from high-SES parents (Breen and Goldthorpe (1997)). When tracking decisions have to be made already at a young age, the parental voice is still utterly important, and the impact of socio-economic background on track placement will be strongest (Brunello and Checchi (2007)).

[17] Moreover, educational resources tend to be unequally distributed across tracks, with the most experienced and most capable teachers often are assigned to the high tracks, leaving the lower tracks to the less experienced teachers (Burns and Darling-Hammond (2014)). Teachers in the lower tracks also tend to develop lower expectations towards their students and act accordingly (Van Houtte (2004)), e.g. by devoting less time to actual instruction (Oakes (1992)). Likewise, the fact that students in lower tracks often end up there because of negative selection may give rise to the development of an entire class culture that gets negatively oriented towards learning, further damaging the learning climate and performance in the lower tracks (Van Houtte and Stevens (2008); Van Houtte and Stevens (2009); Van Houtte and Stevens (2010)).

seemed detrimental to the educational opportunities of socially disadvantaged students, while it did not seem to affect the achievement of their more advantaged peers.

On the other hand, as we saw above (cf. Figure 3), Continental countries are relatively stratified, i.e. educational attainment determines occupational and social success to a large extent (Allmendinger (1989)). Hence, while the *direct* effect of Origin on Destination is expected to be reduced in these countries, its *indirect* effect, i.e. through Education, could be expected to still be rather strong.

### Anglo-Saxon countries

In particular the American system has historically been developed to break away from the social reproduction typical of the old European societies (see §1.3). However, more recent data increasingly point at a strongly reduced social mobility in the United States (Putnam (2015)). Hence, Jantti, Bratsberg, Roed, Raaum, Naylor, Osterbacka, Bjorklund, and Eriksson (2006) report how earnings mobility is nowadays much lower in the USA than in Europe. Green, Green, and Pensiero (2015) argue that the high reliance on individual choices in the Anglo-Saxon school systems foster social inequity at school: '*the greater the variety of different routes through the education system, the greater the likelihood that socially differentiated aspirations and expectations will structure student choices*'. This is amplified by the larger income inequality in the Anglo-Saxon world, which is itself due to their less redistributive tax system and the more polarized skill structures typical for Anglo-Saxon regimes (see § 1.1). As we have stressed in Lavrijsen and Nicaise (2013b), where we showed that children from low-educated parents are far more likely to drop out from high school in countries with high poverty rates, socioeconomic inequality strongly influences social inequalities in educational attainment. Moreover, there are often large differences in the socio-economic composition and funding of schools.

### Mediterranean countries

As we have showed above, in the Mediterranean countries labour market outcomes are less related to educational background (cf. Figure 3). Overall, this is expected to affect social mobility negatively: when education ceases to play its role as the dominant allocation mechanism, other mechanisms will fill its place, and these mechanisms are probably more dependent on social origin. As Dronkers (2010) has argued, '*leaving the (socially inevitable) selection to the labour market instead of the educational system creates the chance that social inequality between students from different strata will become even greater than the inequality that exists within education. After all, selection is even less universalistic (meaning the same criteria apply to everyone) on the labour market than it is in education.*' For example, Maurin and McNally (2008) have showed that lowering examination thresholds (due to the abandonment of normal examination procedures at the French universities during the turmoil of May 1968) effectively reduced social mobility for the cohort involved.

### Nordic countries

Finally, the Nordic countries have been repeatedly shown to be relatively fair and socially mobile (cf. Boudon (1974), Jantti, Bratsberg, Roed, Raaum, Naylor, Osterbacka, Bjorklund, and Eriksson (2006)). This

can be attributed both to their educational system design (cf. Antikainen (2006)) as to the overall lower level of income inequality in these countries.

### 2.2.2 What is needed to get ahead in life?

To consider the extent to which citizens from different countries perceive the social fairness of the system, we will make use of the 2009 wave of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP). The ISSP is an annual survey, which occasionally covers opinions about social and educational inequality. In the 2009 wave, a number of questions was included about the perceived importance of different factors to advance in life. In particular, respondents had to indicate how important a number of assets was to get ahead in life (Table 6). We distinguish here between two kinds of assets. First, we consider a number of *ascribed* assets, i.e. assets for which somebody cannot, in any way, be held responsible: the wealth, educational level or network of one's parents, or one's race. Arguably, social fair systems would attempt to minimize the importance of these assets in determining life outcomes. Secondly, *individual responsibility* assets refer to characteristics that relate to the meritocratic ideal: acquiring a good education oneself, working hard, and having ambition. However, note that in particular 'having a good education' might be influenced itself by ascribed assets (see above).

**Table 6 Importance of various assets to get ahead in life, as surveyed in ISSP 2009**

| **How important is … to get ahead in life?** | |
|---|---|
| Ascribed assets | Coming from a wealthy family |
| | Having well-educated parents |
| | A person's race |
| | Knowing the right people |
| Individual responsibility assets | Having a good education |
| | Hard work |
| | Having ambition |

Respondents could indicate the perceived importance of each asset in five categories: 'essential', 'very important', 'fairly important', 'not very important', or 'not important at all'. In this report, we focus on the share of the sample that indicated that the asset was 'essential' or 'very important to get ahead in life'.

Note that these questions thus not cover any *normative* judgments: respondents indicated how they perceived the *actual* situation, not what they considered as the desired situation. The results in this section are thus mostly descriptive, aiming at considering how countries differ in their realisation of the meritocratic ideal. In our previous reports, we have usually assessed this actual situation in a more objective way: for example, we considered how social origin statistically affected educational outcomes such as school dropout. However, how respondents *perceive* the actual situation might be important in its own right, for example because these perceptions affect the legitimacy of the social system.

Table 7 reports the participating countries, well distributed across the regimes, and their sample sizes.

**Table 7 Sample sizes of selected countries from ISSP 2009**

| Continental | | Nordic | | Anglo-Saxon | | Mediterranean | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Country** | **Sample size** | **Country** | **Sample size** | **Country** | **Sample size** | **Country** | **Sample size** |
| AT | 1,019 | DK | 1,518 | AU | 1,525 | FR | 2,817 |
| FL | 1,115 | FI | 880 | NZ | 935 | IT | 1,084 |
| DE | 1,395 | IS | 947 | GB | 958 | PT | 1,000 |
| | | NO | 1,456 | US | 1,581 | ES | 1,215 |
| | | SE | 1,137 | | | | |

#### 2.2.2.1 Overall picture

First, Figure 9 presents, for each of the seven assets, the share in each country which agreed that the asset was 'essential' or 'very important' to get ahead in life. While we zoom in to cross-national differences in the next figures, this figures demonstrates that, overall, the assets referring to individual responsibility (having a good education, working hard, and showing ambition) are perceived as far more important than the ascribed assets (coming from a wealthy family, having well-educated parents, knowing the right people, and race). This suggests that, fortunately, most Western citizens are convinced that their social status is distributed in their society in a more or less fair way. To further underline this issue, we included in the right panel of Figure 9 the share of respondents reporting that 'coming from a wealthy family' is a major asset to advance in life for a number of Asian, African, Latin-American and Central- and Eastern-European countries. This comparison emphasizes the relative low shares observed in most Western countries that attributes success to social origin, when set in a global context, with shares in countries such as China, Southern Africa but also Poland or Bulgaria far exceeding the share observed in even the least fair Western countries. Hence, while we will focus in the remainder on differences between Western European countries, we should not neglect that these already constitute a relatively fair subset of the global world.

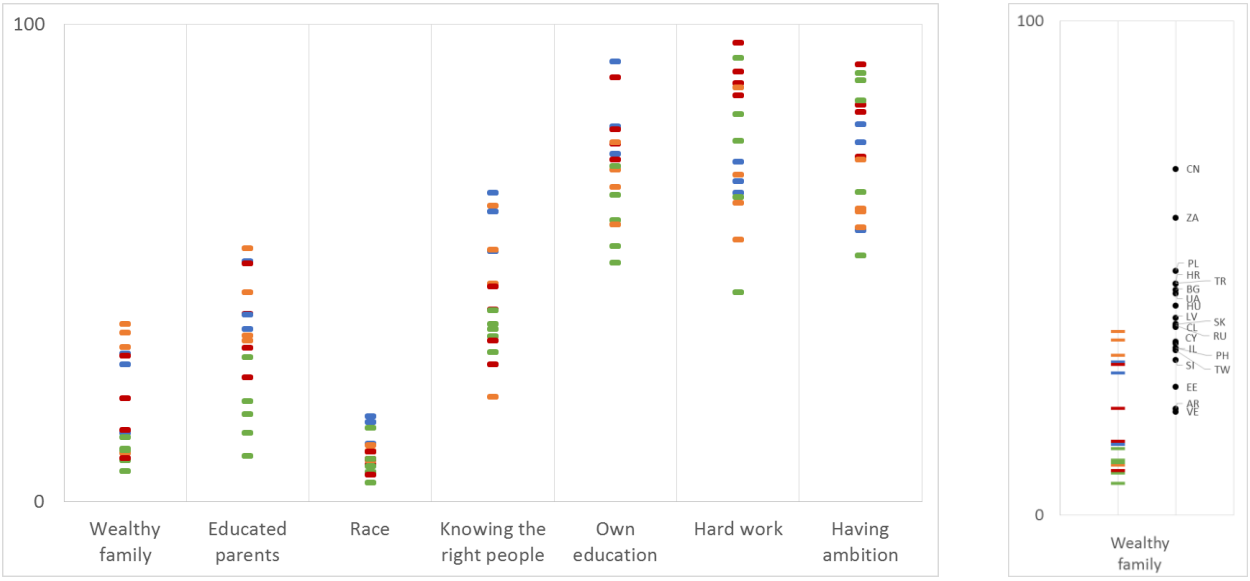



**Figure 9 (Left) Share agreeing that a certain asset was important to get ahead in life**

**(Right) Comparison of Western and non-Western countries for the asset 'coming from a wealthy family'**

### 2.2.2.2 Cross-national comparison

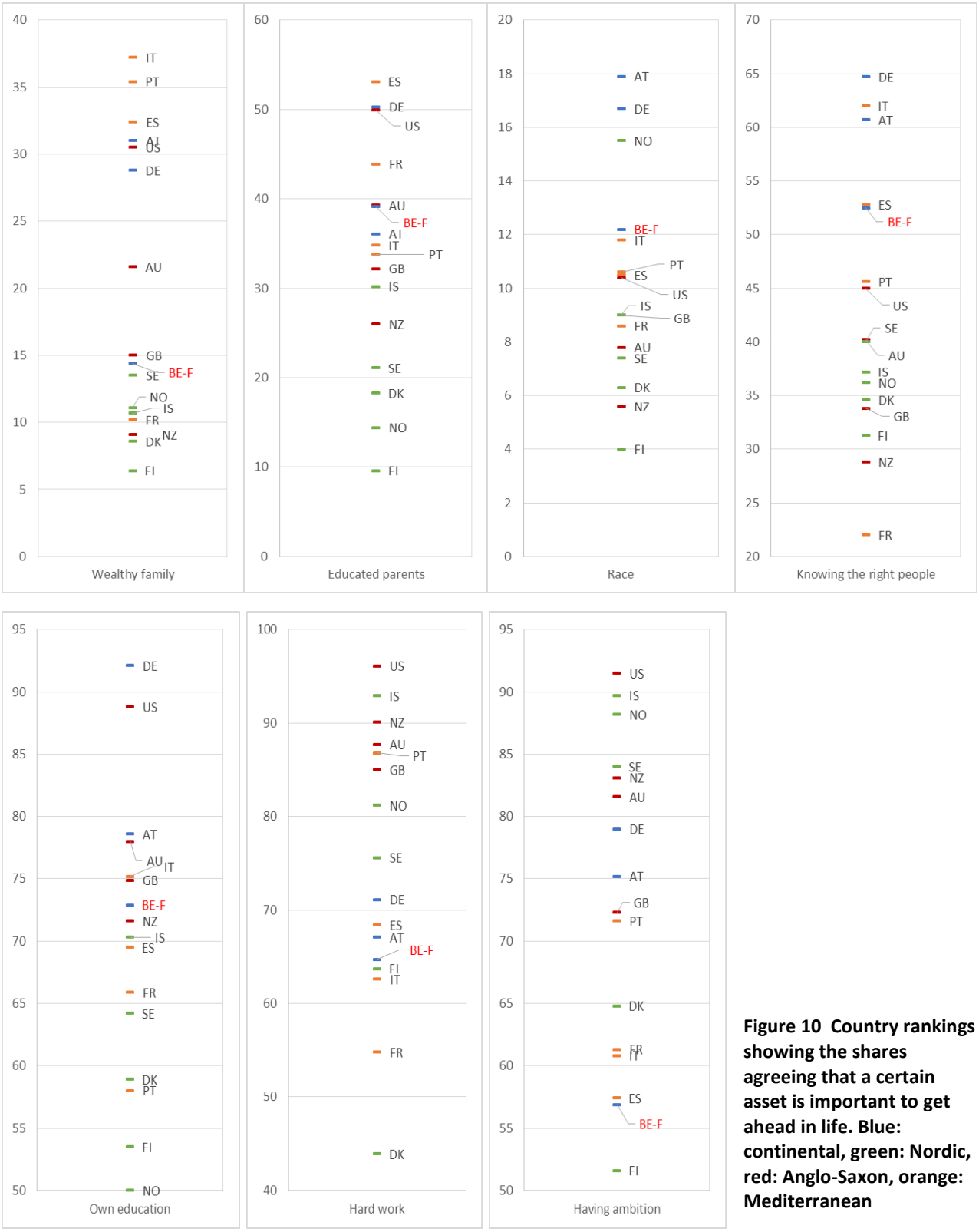



**Figure 10 Country rankings showing the shares agreeing that a certain asset is important to get ahead in life. Blue: continental, green: Nordic, red: Anglo-Saxon, orange: Mediterranean**

We will now zoom in on the differences between countries in the extent that respondents indicated that each specific asset was important for getting ahead; Figure 10 thus replicates Figure 9, but allowing more detail for each asset. For the Flemish Region, one should note that ascribed assets such as 'having well-educated parents', 'knowing the right people', and 'race' are perceived as more important for life success than average (this doesn't apply for the asset 'coming from a wealthy family'). The other way round, 'hard work' and 'having ambition' are reported by relatively small shares of the respondents, with 'having a good education' scoring about average.

In order to examine whether this relatively unfair perception of the social structure is typical for the Continental systems, and in order to disentangle other possible relationships between educational system design and the perceived social fairness, we again constructed standardized figure scores, similar to the construction in paragraph 0. This means that we again standardized all shares previously presented in Figure 10 and plotted these on a raster with axes ranging from -2 (the centre point of the graph) to +2 (indicated by an outside polygon), adding an inner polygon indicating the international average.

Figure 11 thus summarizes the idea. The four ascribed assets (coming from a wealthy family, having well-educated parents, knowing the right people, and race) are presented at the right side of the figure, the three individual responsibility assets (having a good education, working hard, and showing ambition) at the left. The red polygon represent an hypothetical system in which the share reporting each ascribed asset as important for getting ahead in life was one standard deviation higher than the international average for this asset (Z = +1), while the share agreeing with the individual responsibility asset was one standard deviation lower than the international average (Z = -1). Hence, in an international comparison, this would reflect a relatively unfair state of affair. The green polygon represents the opposite situation (Z = -1 for the ascribed assets, Z = +1 for the individual responsibility assets), corresponding to a system fairer than average. Again, note that the polygons thus represent relative positions, not absolute shares.

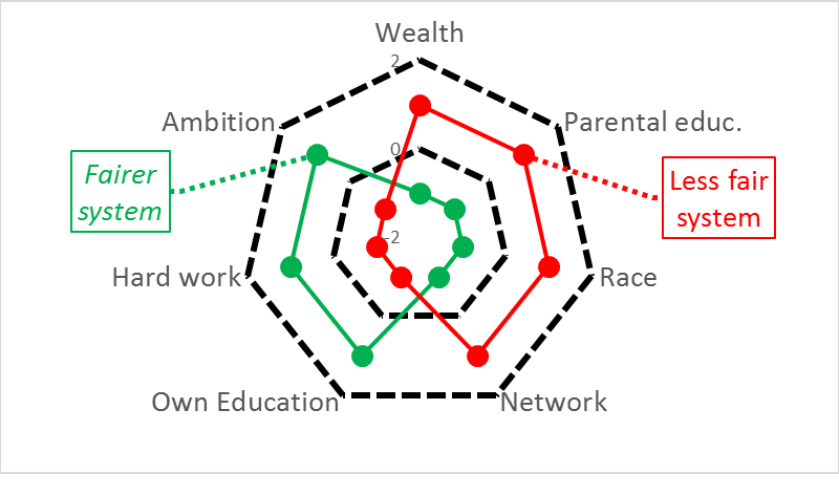



**Figure 11 Two hypothetical systems, represented as standardized polygons**

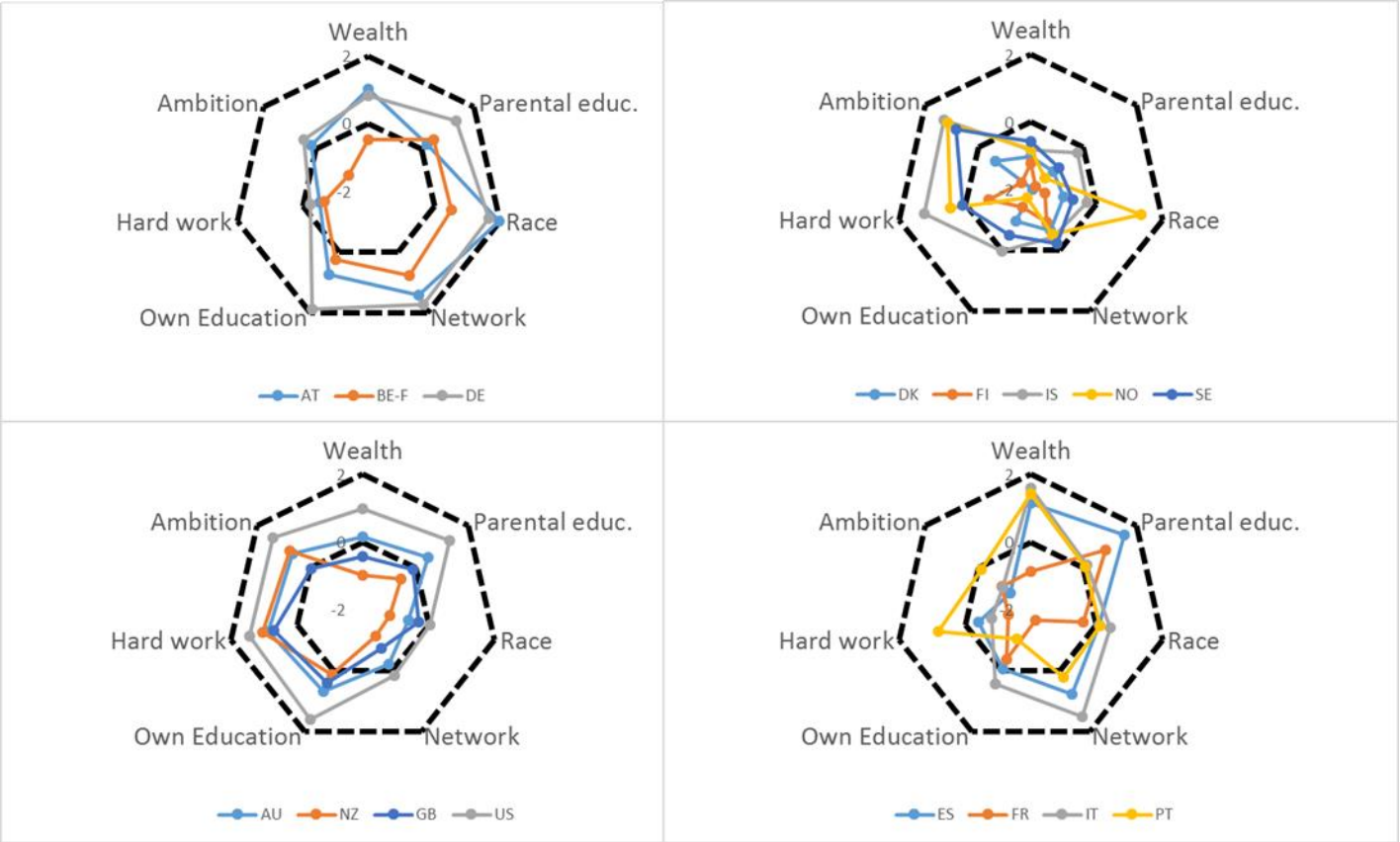



**Figure 12 Standardized polygons, representing the shares agreeing that a certain asset is important to get ahead in life**

Figure 12 summarizes all standardized polygons, categorized by educational system type. Overall, the figure indicates a remarkable correspondence between educational system design and the perceived importance of certain assets to get ahead in life.

First, in the Continental countries, the ascribed assets are perceived to be relatively important: compared to other countries, a rather large share of the respondents report that wealth, parental education, race and a social network are key to get ahead in life. This seems to reflect the relatively strong tie between social origin and educational achievement repeatedly observed in early tracking systems (cf. Lavrijsen and Nicaise (2015a)). By contrast, the individual responsibility assets of working hard and showing ambition are perceived to be slightly less important than average. However, educational achievement is deemed to be relatively important for social success in these countries, which reflects the relatively strongly stratified nature of these countries (Allmendinger (1989)), in which occupational destinations are closely tied to educational background (cf. Figure 3). Note that in Flanders, these patterns seems less pronounced than in Germany and Austria.

By contrast, in the Nordic countries ascribed assets are perceived to be much less important to get ahead in life (with a remarkable exception for 'race' in Norway). This as well corresponds to the high degree of equal opportunities in their educational systems (Dupriez, Dumay, and Vause (2008)). In particular

individual responsibilities, such as working hard and showing ambition, are perceived to be more important than average. Interestingly, the share reporting education to be important to get ahead is lower than average, which could relate to the egalitarian conditions on the labour market, resulting in small income differentials between high- and low-educated occupations.

In the Anglo-Saxon world, meritocratic principles such as working hard and showing ambition are also considered important. The main difference with the Nordics is that in these extremely competitive societies also educational accomplishments are key in reaching social success (cf. Hanushek, Schwerdt, Wiederhold, and Woessmann (2013)). Moreover, in particular in the United States, with its high level of income inequality, the wealth of one's parents is recognized to be an important determinant of personal success.

Finally, the Mediterranean countries report the less attractive pattern combining a high reliance on ascribed assets with a low grip of individual responsibility on life outcomes. This includes a weak link between education and social success (see above), emphasizing the observation by Dronkers (2010) that leaving social selection to the labour market instead of the educational system only serves to reduce, not increase, social mobility.

#### 2.2.2.3 Trends over time

Above, we relied on data from the 2009 wave of the ISSP. However, a similar module on social inequality, surveying the same variables[18], has also been included in three previous waves: 1987, 1992, and 1999. In this paragraph, we will analyse the cumulated results from the four waves together. First, this allows us to consider the robustness of the observations based on the 2009 wave alone. Secondly, we can consider possible time trends in the perceptions about social fairness. As we can only use countries which were included in at least two waves, the number of countries is smaller than in the previous paragraph. Table 8 lists the available countries and their sample sizes[19].

[18] In 1999, the variables referring to parental education, race, own education, hard work and showing ambition were not collected.

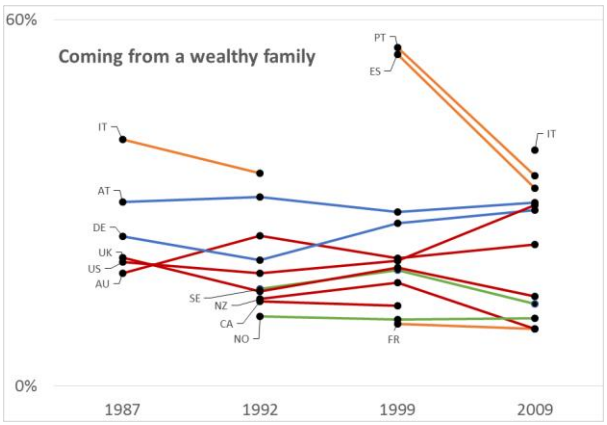
[19] In 1987, Germany was still divided in West and East Germany; only the Western part participated in the survey.

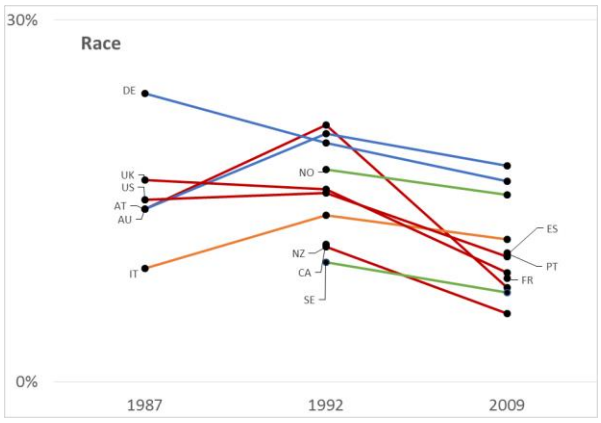
**Table 8 Sample size of four waves of the ISSP**

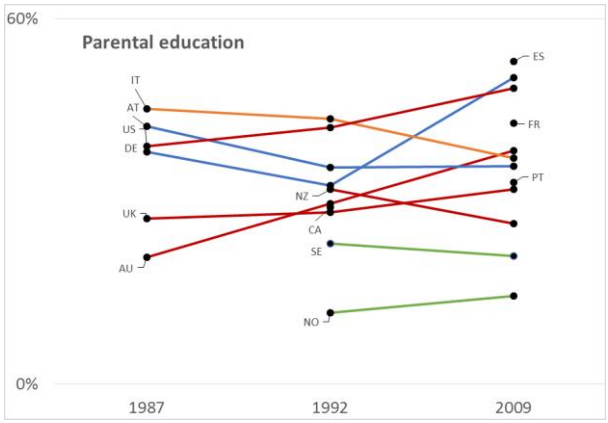
| | 1987 | 1992 | 1999 | 2009 | Total (all years) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **AU** | 1,663 | 2,203 | 1,672 | 1,525 | 7,063 |
| **AT** | 972 | 1,027 | 1,016 | 1,019 | 4,034 |
| **CA** | - | 1,002 | 974 | - | 1,976 |
| **FR** | - | - | 1,889 | 2,817 | 4,706 |
| **DE** | 1,397 | 3,391 | 1,432 | 1,395 | 7,615 |
| **IT** | 1,027 | 996 | - | 1,084 | 3,107 |
| **NZ** | - | 1,239 | 1,108 | 935 | 3,282 |
| **NO** | - | 1,538 | 1,268 | 1,456 | 4,262 |
| **PT** | - | - | 1,144 | 1,000 | 2,144 |
| **ES** | - | - | 1,211 | 1,215 | 2,426 |
| **SE** | - | 749 | 1,150 | 1,137 | 3,036 |
| **UK** | 1,212 | 1,066 | 804 | 958 | 4,040 |
| **US** | 1,564 | 1,273 | 1,272 | 1,581 | 5,690 |
| **Total (all countries)** | 7,835 | 14,484 | 14,940 | 16,122 | 53,381 |

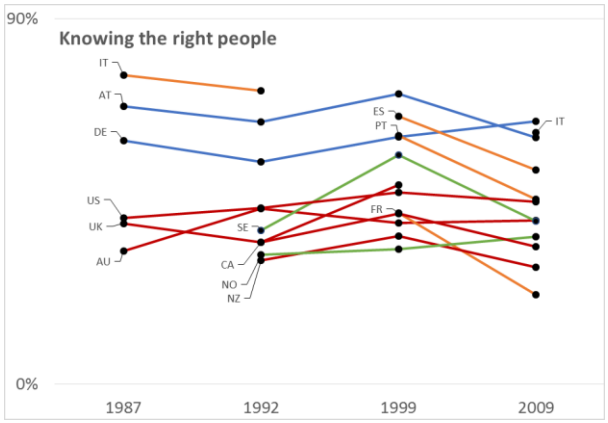
Figure 13 shows the trend over the different waves. First, for most assets, the country order has been roughly stable over time[20]. This suggests that the correspondence between system type and perceived fairness, as observed in the previous paragraph for 2009, seems to have some longer-term stability. However, note that while the Mediterranean countries are still attributing a higher importance to ascribed assets than the other regime types (in particular to family wealth, parental level, and networks), this importance at least seems to be declining. Secondly, no unambiguous time trend over the 22 year period can be detected for most assets, with the exception of 'race', which seems to have become less important in most countries, and of 'working hard' , which seems to be considered more important nowadays than it was on earlier occasions.

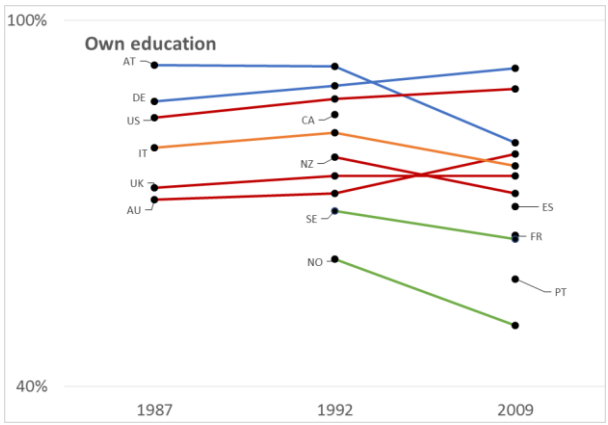
[20] Interestingly, also the relatively high importance of race in Norway observed in 2009 can be reproduced in the 1992 wave.

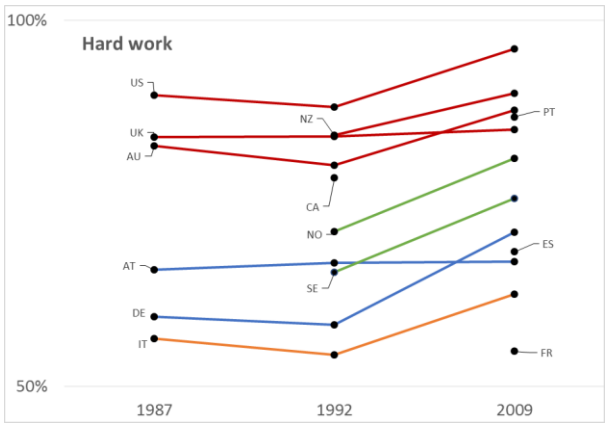


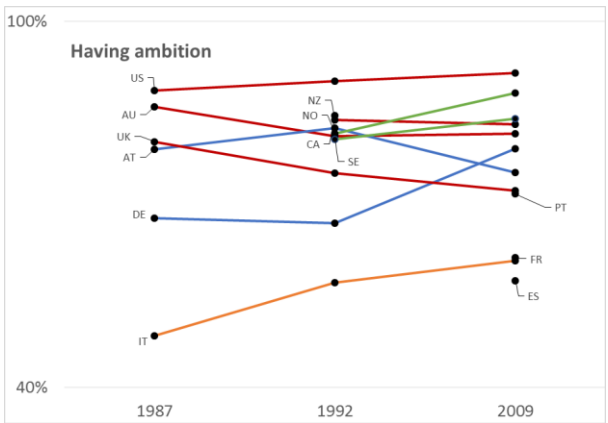




**Figure 13 Trends over time in the perceived importance of certain assets to get ahead in life (ISSP)**

#### 2.2.2.4 Relationship with individual educational background

In the previous paragraph, we considered country-average judgements about the importance of various assets to get ahead in life. In this section, we will consider how these judgments depend on the educational background of respondents: do the high- and low-educated have different ideas about what is needed to be successful?

The literature suggests indeed a number of reasons why we could indeed expect such a difference. Overall, the high-educated might be less sensitive about remaining inequalities of opportunity. For example, both Warikoo and Fuhr (2014) and Khan and Jerolmack (2013) provide recent examples of how students in elite schools increasingly start to believe that their educational success is completely merited, neglecting other factors such as social advantage (and luck). Similarly, Räty, Snellman, Mantesaari Hetekorpi, and Vornanen (1996) argue that social representations of educability depend on someone's own school experiences. Shedd and Hagan (2006) add to this that segregated learning environments restrict the frame of reference of youngsters; for example, racially segregated schools could lead to an underestimation of ethnic (dis-) advantages.

Such arguments would suggest that the link between educational background and attributions about what is need to get ahead would be stronger in countries in which the educational system is more segregated, due to a more stringent curriculum differentiation (in particular in the countries with early tracking) or social and ethnic school segregation (in the Anglo-Saxon states). Indeed, Mijs (2016) has recently shown that in highly stratified systems students are more likely to attribute failure at school to internal factors, in particular a lack of ability.

We compare the effect of educational attainment on attributions of success by modelling, for each country separately, the probability that a respondent thinks a certain asset (e.g. family wealth) is important as a (logistic) function of his years of schooling. We control for age and sex and restrict ourselves to respondents aged 25 years of above (we remove respondents reporting more than 25 years of education).

Figure 14 illustrates the results graphically, with the standardized years of schooling on the horizontal axis, and the estimated shares agreeing with each asset to be important on the vertical axis (we averaged out the estimates for all countries within a certain regime). For three out of four ascribed assets (family wealth, race, and networks), the gradients are negative, meaning that the higher educated are less willing to attribute success to these assets. In particular, the link with the educational background is strongest in the Anglo-Saxon group (with the USA reporting the strongest gradients, as shown in ??); while the advantaged still seem to believe in the 'American dream' of social mobility (Kluegel & Smith (1986), Hochschild (1996)), the disadvantaged seem to understand this to be a myth (Meyer (2006)). Similarly, in the Continental group race and networks are perceived as less important to get ahead by the better educated; however, there is only a very small gradient in the perceived importance of coming from a wealthy family. In the Nordic and Mediterranean groups, the reported gradients are much weaker. For the fourth asset, parental education, the gradient is inversed: having educated parents is perceived as *more* important by respondents who are themselves higher educated. Similarly, the perceived importance of the own education increases with educational level,

except in the Mediterranean group. Finally, hard work and ambition are cited by about equally large shares across the educational spectrum.

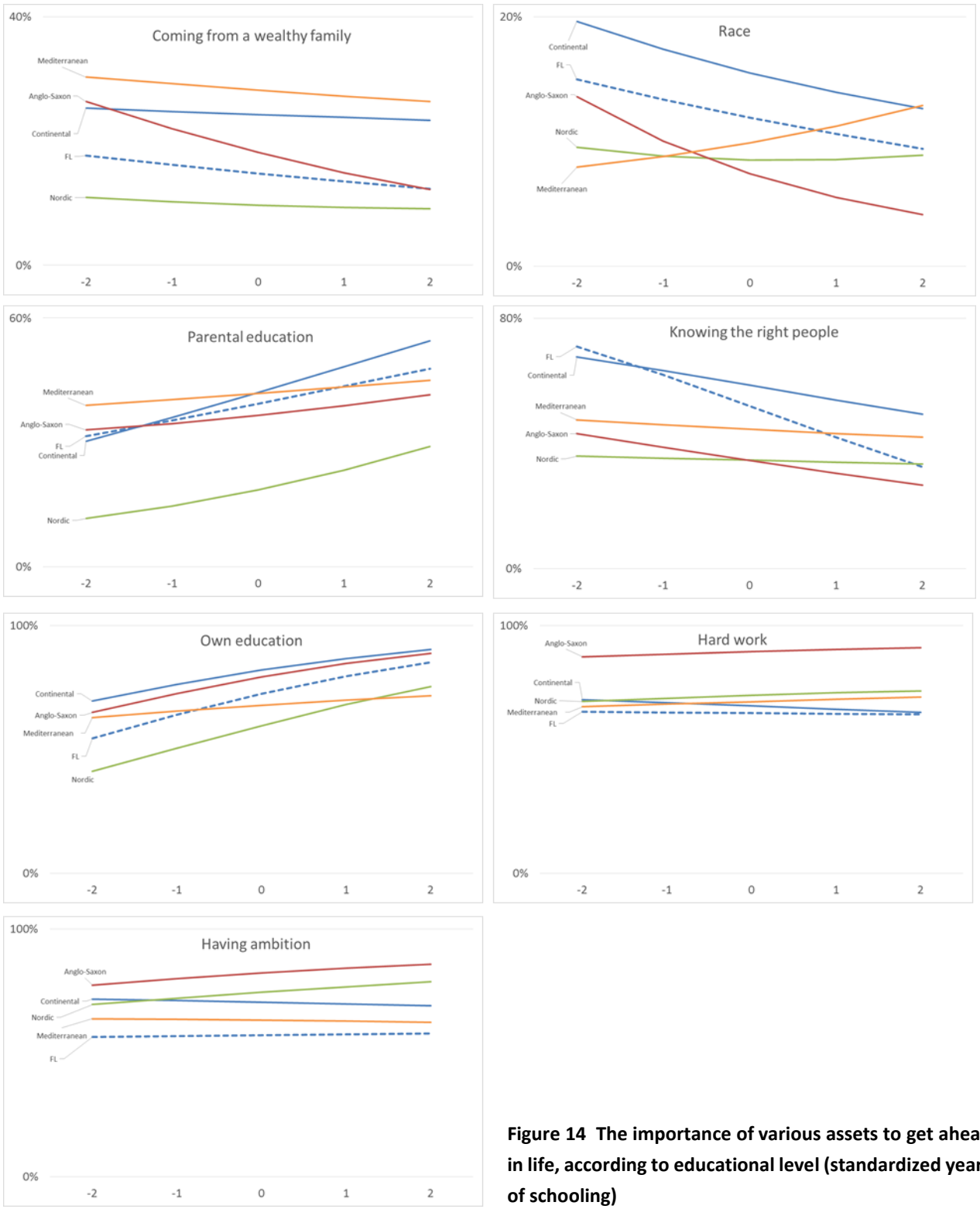



**Figure 14 The importance of various assets to get ahead in life, according to educational level (standardized years of schooling)**

### 2.2.3 What is needed to enter university?

The ISSP 2009 wave also contained a number of questions regarding the perceived fairness of the school system itself[21]. In particular, three questions regarding equal opportunities in the access to university were collected. Respondents had to express their agreement (on a 5-point Likert scale) with the following statements:

- "*only students from the best secondary schools have a good chance to obtain a university education*"
- "*only the rich can afford the costs of attending university*"
- "*people have the same chances to enter university, regardless of their gender, ethnicity or social background"*

Respondents could indicate whether they 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'neither agree nor disagree', 'disagree', or 'strongly disagree' with these statements. We calculated the share 'strongly agreeing' or 'agreeing' with the first two statements, and, to take into account the inverse formulation, the share *not* 'strongly agreeing' or 'agreeing' with the third statement. Hence, for all three variables, the higher the share, the less equal opportunities at school are perceived.

#### 2.2.3.1 Cross-national comparison

Figure 15 presents the shares in each country agreeing with a statement on equal opportunities in access to university. Before zooming in on the differences between Western countries, we again highlight that, as shown in the right panel, most Western countries perceive their educational systems as relatively fair in comparison with other parts of the world: countries such as Ukraine, Russia, or South Africa report much higher inequities than even the least fair Western countries.


**Figure 15** **(Left) Share agreeing with statements that access to universities is unequal (Right) Comparison of Western and non-Western countries for the share agreeing that "*only the rich can afford the costs of attending university*"**

[21] As these questions were not included in previous waves, we can in this section make no time trend analyses.

Figure 15 shows that in the Flemish Region the fairness in the access to university is perceived as mediocre, with a high share reporting that access is strongly related to school quality. In order to further examine the relationship between the perceived fairness of the educational system and educational regime, we again constructed standardized figure scores (cf. § 0), in which all shares presented in Figure 15 were standardized and plotted on a raster with axes ranging from -2 (the centre point of the graph) to +2 (indicated by an outside polygon), adding an inner polygon indicating the international average (0).

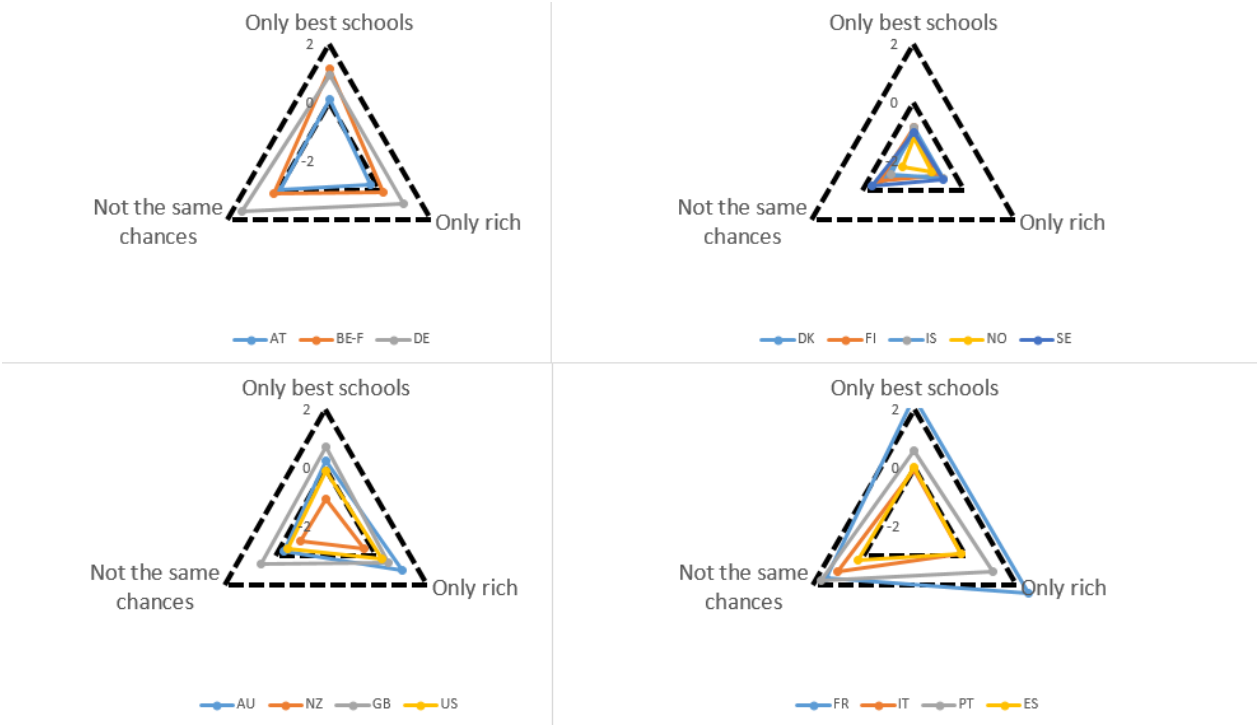



**Figure 16 Standardized polygons, representing the shares agreeing access to universities is unequal**

Figure 16 summarizes all standardized polygons, categorized by educational system type. This figure indicates a remarkable correspondence between educational system design and the perceived inequity in university access. First, in particular in the Mediterranean and, to a somewhat smaller extent, in the Continental countries respondents perceive the access to higher education as relatively unfair (note in particular the high level of inequity observed in France). Tellingly, this corresponds well to the high social inequity in school performance (PISA) observed in educational systems relying extensively on grade retention and early tracking, as described by Dupriez, Dumay, and Vause (2008) (cf. § 1.1.2). By contrast, in particular in the Nordic countries access to university is perceived as being far less unfair.

### 2.2.3.2 Relationship with individual educational background

Similar to the previous section, we considered how someone's own educational background might affect perceptions about educational inequities. To this end, we again modelled, for each country separately, the probability that a respondent thinks that access to university is unequal (for each of the three statements) as a function of his years of schooling, controlling for age and sex and removing

respondents aged below 25 years. Figure 17 illustrates the results, with the standardized years of schooling at the horizontal axis, and the estimated shares perceiving access as unfair on the vertical.

First, overall, the observed educational gradients are very strong, in particular for the statements "*only students from the best secondary schools have a good chance to obtain a university education*" and "*only the rich can afford the costs of attending university*". Only a small fraction of the high educated consider these statements to be true, while the agreement is much higher at the lower end of the educational spectrum. By contrast, agreement with the statement "*people have the same chances to enter university, regardless of their gender, ethnicity or social background*" is much more equally distributed among educational attainment levels. One reason is that this question was formulated more generally, with a less explicit reference to educational background (e.g. the reference to 'gender' as a criterion for university access could be felt as more important among high-educated women than among low-educated women).

Secondly, comparing the average gradients from different educational regimes, in particular the Continental (early tracking) countries report a strong effect of educational background on the perceived fairness in university access. While the higher educated in these countries are relatively optimistic about equality of educational opportunity, those with a lower educational attainment do not share this feeling; at the lower end of the spectrum, the perceived inequity in the Continental countries equals or even exceeds that in the Mediterranean countries. Note that for the Flemish Region, the gradients are particularly steep.

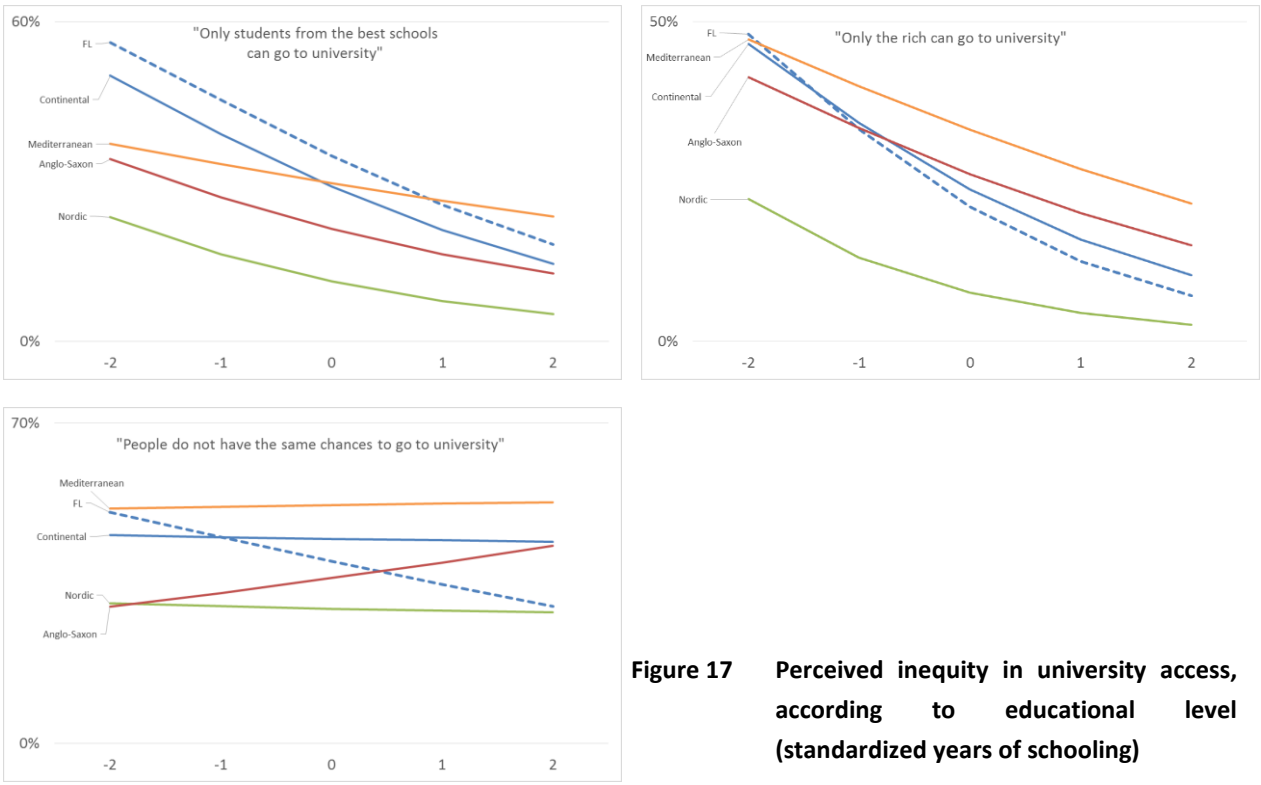



**Figure 17** **Perceived inequity in university access, according to educational level (standardized years of schooling)**

### 2.2.4 Conclusion

In this section, we considered how citizens from various educational regimes perceive the fairness of society as a whole, and of the educational system in particular. While, in comparison with other parts of the world, a large share of the respondents from Western countries reported to believe that individual responsibility is key to get ahead at school or in life, a number of interesting country-differences emerged.

First, the ***Mediterranean countries*** reported a relatively unattractive picture. Relatively large shares of respondents perceived ascribed assets, such as wealth and parental education, to be key to get ahead in life (Figure 12); by contrast, one's own education was considered to be less important. Moreover, the educational systems of these countries, typified by Dupriez, Dumay, and Vause (2008) as 'uniform integration' systems with a massive reliance on grade retention to deal with heterogeneity, were considered to be less fair, with chances to enter university largely dependent on family wealth and school quality (Figure 16).

In the ***Continental countries*** education was considered to be much more important to be successful in life. However, this did not imply that ascribed assets, such as family wealth, parental education or race, were perceived to have ceased to determine life chances (Figure 12). Indeed, educational success was itself perceived to function in a relatively unfair way, in particular among those who did not achieve a high educational level themselves (Figure 17).

In the ***Anglo-Saxon world***, individual responsibility – educational achievement, hard work, showing ambition – was reported as the most important ingredient for getting ahead in life (Figure 12). However, this belief was not shared by everybody. At the lower end of the educational spectrum, many respondents pointed to the strong dependence of life outcomes on ascribed assets such as family wealth, in particular in the USA (Figure 14).

Finally, in the ***Nordic countries***, working hard and showing ambition were perceived as by far the strongest determinants of life success, with family wealth or parental education cited by only very small shares (Figure 12). Moreover, access to university was believed to be largely independent of social background (Figure 16). Maybe most important, these beliefs were shared both by the low- and the high-educated, with only a small little effect of educational background on the level of support (Figure 14 and Figure 17).

# Chapter 3 General conclusion

In a series of SSL-reports, we have discussed how the design of the educational system affects the outcomes of different groups of pupils on different time horizons. In a first exploratory report, Lavrijsen & Nicaise (2013a), we suggested a number of possible effects based on a literature review, which we then further substantiated throughout the subsequent empirical research reports.

First, it was suggested that relying on early tracking would be negative for socially disadvantaged and/or weaker students. Combining data from PIRLS and PISA, Lavrijsen & Nicaise (2015a) suggested that early tracking increases the effect of social origin on reading achievement: countries that track pupils at an early age display stronger effects of social origin on individual achievement in secondary school, net of differences existing before the onset of tracking. In particular, early tracking seems detrimental to the educational opportunities of socially disadvantaged students, while it does not seem to affect the achievement of their more advantaged peers. Similarly, Lavrijsen & Nicaise (2016a) considered the effect of tracking on students at different levels of skill proficiency (instead of the effect on students from different social backgrounds), using data from PRILS, TIMSS and PISA. For all skills considered - literacy, numeracy and scientific skills - early tracking negatively affects the performance of low achievers. Interestingly, however, the strength of the effect depends somewhat on the subject domain, with less negative effects for the numeracy skills in particular. Secondly, the effect on the top performers is in all cases small and not statistically significant; however, the sign of these effects depends again on the subject domain, with a small positive influence of tracking on the numeracy score and a small negative effect on the literacy score of the top performers[22]. In sum, the relatively high social inequality and the large gaps between weak and strong performers observed in the Flemish educational system (cf. OECD (2012)) seems to be related with its educational structure. See for a further discussion on this issue also Lavrijsen & Nicaise (2014b), Lavrijsen & Nicaise (2014d) and Lavrijsen, Nicaise & Wouters (2013).

Secondly, the most important message from Lavrijsen & Nicaise (2013b) was that social inequalities in educational attainment are not only a result of the way the educational system functions, but also of socioeconomic inequalities outside the reach of schools. Surely, educational system design matters: a well-developed vocational education segment reduces school dropout as it offers valuable alternatives to less academically inclined students, while early tracking is again associated with a larger effect of parental background on the dropout risk. However, the strongest generator of social inequalities in school dropout comes from outside the school system: children from low-educated parents are far more likely to drop out when poverty is high. This finding thus confirms an early concern by Boudon (1974) that *'the best strategy seems to lie (…) outside rather than inside schools, in social and economic change rather than in educational change; any lessening of stratification through a reduction of economic inequality is probably more likely to affect educational inequality than any other factor*'.

[22] It remains an issue for future research to explore to what extent this finding might be related to the particularities of the discipline itself. For example, one explanation could be that for a highly abstract subject such as mathematics the benefits of being taught in a homogeneous classroom are relatively more important. However, the data at hand do not allow us to test this idea, and alternative explanations – for example, data issues, in particular the lower comparability between what is tested in TIMSS and what is tested in PISA – cannot be excluded neither.

Accordingly, it might serve as a warning not to over-estimate the capacity of the education system to attenuate social inequalities: as Wielemans (1991) called it, educational reform is '*a weak lever, which will break while trying to move the whole of society: social objectives of educational reform cannot be realised without strong and explicit backing from other important elements in society.*' For Flanders, we found that both the relatively low average level of dropout and the medium strong link with parental background might be explained by a combination of a large vocational system, a relatively early tracking age, and a relatively low poverty level.

In Lavrijsen & Nicaise (2014c), we zoomed in on the value of vocational education in the labour market. The empirical analysis confirmed that vocational education secures relatively safe pathways into employment[23]. However, for older respondents vocational education seems to lose some of its value relative to academically oriented programmes. This age pattern can be related to the lower versatility of vocational education, where less emphasis is put on the development of foundational skills such as literacy and numeracy; hence, when job requirements change over time (e.g. because of technological developments), a narrowly designed vocational education may not enable graduates to successfully adapt to changing labour market needs. Of course, this observation constitutes only one part of a broader evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of orienting the educational system towards vocational skills; a much more elaborate account of this 'vocationalism', both in economic, educational, and social terms, can be found in Ryan (2003). Still, this trade-off between short-term benefits and long-term losses seems to underline the relevance of heavy investments in general skills also in (pre-)vocational tracks. For Flanders, this was highlighted by the large share of vocational graduates not obtaining the requirements for the general subjects (Peilingen PAV).

In Lavrijsen & Nicaise (2015b) and Lavrijsen & Nicaise (2016b) we considered cross-national differences in lifelong learning participation. In particular, we examined the extent to which these differences could be explained by differences in the design of the initial school system. Overall, more negative attitudes towards learning among adults, particularly at the lower end of the educational achievement spectrum, seem to be associated with a reliance on early tracking and/or grade retention. However, this report surely was the most inconclusive: the small sample sizes precluded robust statistical estimations, while the strength of the observed relationships depends on the way variables are operationalized. Hence, further research is needed for a more thorough understanding of how the educational system affects attitudes towards learning, paying particular attention to the potential distortion by unobserved country-level factors. For example, the relatively negative attitudes towards learning observed among Flemish adults (linked to a relatively low participation in lifelong learning) corresponded to a relatively negative attitude towards school observed already in primary school.

Finally, this report shows that educational system design also might affect perceptions about education. In particular, we found that both the perceived connection with the labour market and the perceived fairness of the social system corresponded to how the educational system is organized. For example, in the Mediterranean countries the weak link between education and the labour market implied that education was only to a limited extent considered to be a pathway to success, which left room for ascribed assets such as wealth and parental education to be important as well. Respondents from the heavily stratified Continental countries, including Flanders, reported education to be much

[23] Note that this (initial) value of vocational education on the labour market also has an implication for the relationship between educational system design and social inequity: when we use early labour market outcomes (instead of skill levels) as outcome measures, vocational oriented systems (including those with early tracking) appear more socially equitable than the Anglo-Saxon general oriented systems.

more important for success in life, but this did not imply that ascribed assets would cease to determine life chances, possibly because educational attainment is in itself considered to partially reflect social background, in particular among the low educated. In the Anglo-Saxon world, individual responsibility was reported to be key for getting ahead in life, but respondents from the lower end of the educational spectrum often point also to the importance of ascribed assets. Finally, in the Nordic countries, working hard and showing ambition are perceived to be the strongest ingredients of a successful life, with ascribed assets being considered to be less relevant for educational and occupational success.

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